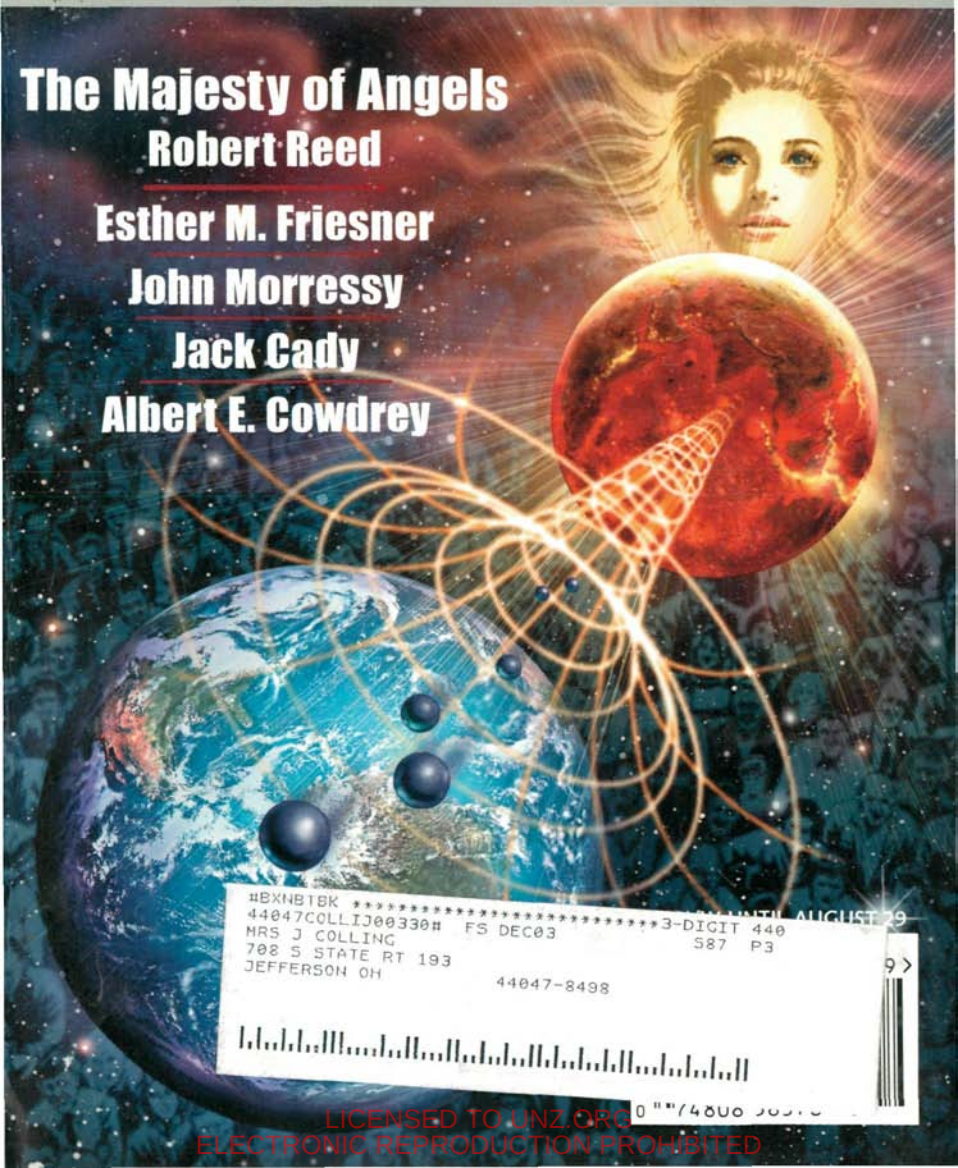
Bruce Sterling: In Paradise

Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER



The Majesty of Angels
Robert Reed

Esther M. Friesner

John Morressy

Jack Cady

Albert E. Cowdrey

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and as vivid as last night's dreams. Well done!"

—Kathy Tyers, author of STAR WARS: *Truce at Bakura* and THE FIREBIRD Trilogy

SHE FROWNED AT HIM AGAIN, tapping a fingernail on the table. Baby-faced researchers, science-fiction technology, secrecy, and evasion. Her fears might be unfounded, even paranoid, but every fiber of Callie's being was screaming at her to beware. And now that it looked like she wouldn't be with Meg anyway, what was the point of staying?

She drew a deep breath and stopped tapping. "I think I'd like to withdraw. I just can't go into this blind."

Alex sighed. "I'm afraid you've already entered the experiment. Your only way out now is through the Arena."

She blinked in confusion.

He drew a slim black book from the pack. "This is your field manual. I advise you to heed its warnings."

Suddenly she couldn't breathe.

He's not going to let me go.

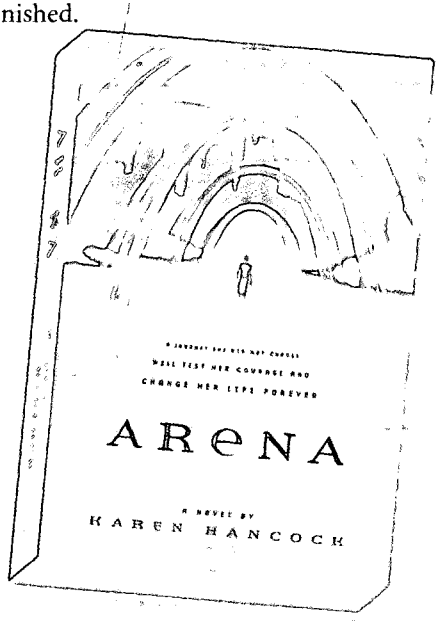
Swallowing hard, she interrupted him. "Why are you doing this?"

His expression was genuinely pained. "You'll understand in time," he said. "Stay on the white road and keep moving. That's very important. There is evil in the Arena. But as long as you stay on the road, it cannot harm you."

He stood and stepped toward her, offering the pack. She backed away, and he stopped with a sigh. "We intend this for your benefit, Callie. You've come to us because you want something better. Don't let fear keep you from finding a new direction."

He held out the pack again. She backed against the door, half angry, wholly terrified. What would he do now? *Make* her take it?

He just stared sadly into her eyes. And vanished.



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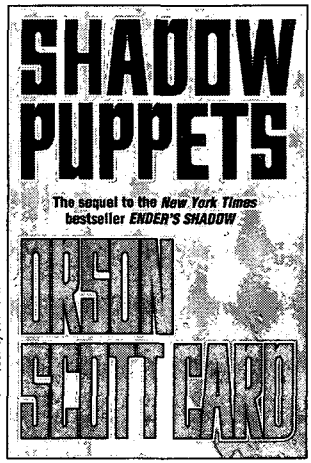

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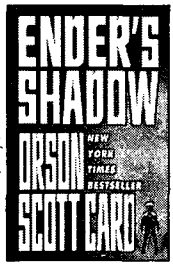

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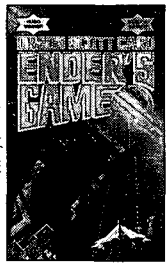

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

SINCE WE emphasize words over pictures and usually have just one illustration, our format doesn't allow us many opportunities to work with new artists. The July cover depicting a jouster and a dragon was a rare exception — that piece from Australian artist Shane Parker came in over the transom.

This month we're happy to showcase a young artist on our back cover. A few months back, Ron Walotsky mentioned that the last time he taught art at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, he gave his students an assignment of illustrating an *F&SF* story ("The Island in the Lake" it was), and then he showed them his own cover illustration.

Why not try it again? I sent Ron an advance copy of "The Majesty of Angels" and of the eighteen pieces of art that resulted, we chose the work of Jenny Kerr, an undergraduate from Taylor Mill, Kentucky. Several of the other pieces gave it good competition — you can see them all on our Website at *www.fsfmag.com*. They're not ready to compete with a master like David Hardy just yet, but I'm sure Ron and Dave are both watching their backs, or more likely, doing their best to encourage a new generation of illustrators.

—GVG

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Robert Reed has been our most prolific contributor for several years now, regaling us with tales of fate and time travel, of wolves and storms, among many topics. His latest story, the occasion for two cover illustrations (see this month's editorial) is one of Mr. Reed's more cosmic stories, but it keeps its feet beneath it and its head clear.

The Majesty of Angels

By Robert Reed

THE DEAD ARE DRESSED TO travel. Their clothes come in every fashion, but always comfortable and practical and familiar. None of them are carrying luggage, because what are possessions? Temporary, and imperfect. Everything worthwhile has come here. These people are here, and nothing else matters.

So many, I declare.

Too many! we blurt in astonishment.

The overseer explains what has happened. An ancient soul wearing a big woman's body, she relates the horrific and tragic with effortless, even graceful dignity. Dignity is vital to our work. She tells us what she knows and nothing else, and it is only our training and our dignified nature that keep us from screaming in anguish, demanding to know how such awful things can happen.

How many teams will be helping us today?

I have to ask it.

The overseer admits that every available team has been assembled,

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plus the full corps of reserves, and every trainee, and the trainees' teachers, and even the most venerable members of the old administrative echelons.

And they won't be enough, I'm thinking. Not nearly enough.

But with a steadying voice, she reminds us of who we are. Do your walk-throughs, she urges. Go on, now. Go!

Walk-throughs are essential.

We show ourselves to the newly dead. That's how it begins. Let them see a face. Let them feel close to you. Give them an opportunity to find qualities familiar and reassuring in that very careful picture you present to them.

Our team is a dozen, including our overseer: Two male bodies, and the rest female. Humans accept these proportions best. They also prefer uniforms, and on this wicked day, we wear dark blue-gray suits with false pockets and narrow gold trim and neat little buttons of brass. To every eye, we look important. Ennobled. Creatures of thorough and perfect competence. I normally cherish this ritual. This walk-through business. My body is tall and young and decidedly female. The crowd parts for me and the dead men can't help but stare. I have long legs and a long, sturdy gait. Countless penises stiffen in my presence. It makes the men grateful, discovering that in death they have held on to this most treasured magic.

A thousand languages carry up toward the illusion of a ceiling.

"She looks like a stewardess," the multitude declares.

One man forgets to step out of my way. He stares at me, particularly at the pin riding above my left breast. He expects to see a crucifix or an Islamic crescent, but the pin is neither. Wearing a puzzled expression, he stands in my way, and I gracefully dance around him, and after I have passed by, he blurts, "Did you see her jewelry?"

"The sideways eight?" says a young woman. "So what's that about?"

"It's mathematical," he explains. "To me, it means infinity."

"Huh," says the woman. "I guess that makes sense, doesn't it?"

Something about the man catches my interest. I'm past him, but I'm lingering, too. His name is Tom. He lived in Oregon. He has two ex-wives and no children, and since he was ten years old, he hasn't believed either in God or Heaven.

"Isn't this just wonderful?" asks the young woman.

Her name is Julianna and she was raised Catholic.

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"Things looked so awful," she says with a beaming smile. "And suddenly, this...!"

Tom nods, asking, "So how'd you die?"

Surprised by his question, Julianna blinks and stares.

With a crooked grin, Tom explains himself. "I was riding my bike. It was...I don't know...sometime last week. I tried to beat the light, and a city bus plowed into me." He laughs amiably, faintly embarrassed by his incompetence. "Right now, just being able to stand and hold my guts inside me...well, that's a major accomplishment!" His laughter thins. Squinting, he adds, "The last thing I remember, I was being wheeled back to surgery. Internal bleeding, I guess...I couldn't breathe...and I remember the orderly pushing me down this long, long hallway...."

Julianna touches him. Her hand is warm and a little sticky.

"You really don't know," she says. "Do you?"

"Know what?"

"Something went wrong in the sky," she tells him. "A few days ago, without warning...it just sort of happened...."

"In the sky?"

"Something exploded," she admits.

"What something? A star?"

"No, it wasn't that," says Julianna. "On the news, they said it might be a quasar. A little one that happened to be close to the Earth — "

"A quasar?"

People grow quiet, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"A black hole started eating gas clouds and stars," Julianna explains, "and there was this terrific light — "

"I know what a quasar is," Tom says. "It's bright, sure, but it's also very, very distant. Billions of light-years removed from us, and perfectly safe, and I don't see how one of them can just appear one day, without warning."

Julianna shrugs. "Maybe our quasar didn't know your rules."

With his own kind of dignity, Tom absorbs the horrific news. Sad brown eyes look at the surrounding faces. Perhaps he notices that most of the faces are young. Children outnumber the elderly by a long measure. Finally with a soft, hurting voice, he asks, "What about the world? And the people?"

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"Dead," says Julianna. "All dead."

More than six billion souls were killed in a heartbeat.

"You were sick," she promises. "Nobody told you what was happening, I bet. I bet not." And again, she touches him.

AN ENORMOUS MACHINE assembles itself around the multitudes. Our passengers find themselves standing inside what resembles the cabin of an airliner or a modern train; yet this machine feels infinitely superior to anything human-built. The ceiling is low but not smothering and feels soft to the touch like treasured old leather. The floor is a carpet of ankle-deep green grass. Ambient sounds hint at power below and great encompassing strength. This interior is a single round room. An enormous room. Padded seats are laid out in neat concentric rings. Normally there is a healthy distance between seats, save in cases where a family or a group of dear friends died in the same accident or a shared plague. But emergency standards rule today. The seats are packed close, as if everyone is someone's brother or sister. Even a graceful creature has to move with constant care, her long legs dancing from place to place to place.

A routine voyage carries several hundred thousand compliant and thankful souls. But this soul-carriage, built according to our meticulous worst-case scenarios, makes the routine appear simple and small.

Every passenger has a seat waiting. Their name and portrait show in the padded headrest, and everyone begins close to their destination. But even normal days bring problems. Children always run off. Adults want to hunt the loved ones who died before them. My first duty is to help everyone settle, and it is a daunting task. Besides the crush of bodies and the armies of kinetic children, I have to cope with our desperate lack of time.

"If you cannot find your seat," I call out, "take another. Take the first empty seat you come across. Please. You must be sitting and restrained before we can begin our voyage. Please. And make the children sit too. Your child, and everyone else's. We're bound for the same place. A shared destination. We must cooperate to make it an easy voyage."

I have a bright, strong voice. A voice worth hearing. But I need to be in many places at once, and my skills reach only so far.

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Six billion people drop into some seat, adults taking responsibility for the young ones. Those left standing beg for help, and I do my absolute best, smiling as I do with every little part of my job.

People call me "the angel" fondly, with easy trust.

Finally, once everyone is sitting somewhere, I stand in front of my passengers. "Yes," I admit, "you have died. You are dead."

Tom sits in my audience. And Julianna has taken the seat beside him.

"Yet you obviously aren't dead," I tell them. "There is a network, a set of embedded and eternal machines that stretch throughout your galaxy. These machines do nothing but rescue sentient souls as they die, then transport them to a place where they will be safe and happy for all time."

In a stew of language, voices blurt out, "Heaven!"

"Call it what you will," I warn, using the same tongues. "Maybe you're right, yes. Your gods could have built the soul-snaring machines and the wormholes that we are going to use. Since I don't know who actually built them, every answer is valid to me."

That attitude rarely makes people sit easier. Yet it has the delicious advantage of being my honest opinion.

"I'm here to serve you," I promise, showing them my warmest smile. "To make your journey easier, I will do everything I can for you."

Always, a few men giggle in a vulgar way.

Not Tom. He sits quietly, dark eyes never blinking while thick hands wrestle nervously in his lap. He is a brown man with receding black hair worn as a ponytail. I touch his armrest and a glassy round screen appears in the air in front of him. "You may watch any movie or television program, read any book, listen to a favorite song, or if you wish, choose any moment in your own life and watch it replayed as your own eyes saw it, in full. The controls on your armrest will explain themselves — "

A hand jumps up.

"Yes, Quincy," I say. "Do you have a question?"

The man is small and pudgy, wearing shorts and a tan safari hat, and he is thrilled that I know his name. "Do we eat?" Quincy asks. "Because I'm feeling awfully hungry."

"Any meal you can think of, we can make." I promise everyone, "I'll

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take your orders later. Though I should add, nobody needs to eat or drink anymore."

Another hand lifts.

"Yes, Jean."

She's a young mother with two tiny children. Custom and common sense have set her between her babies. Quite reasonably, she asks, "Will this be a long trip?"

"It will be, yes. I'm sorry, Jean. We have a tremendous distance ahead of us."

Tom makes a low sound.

I look at him. I smile, always. "Do you have a question, Tom?"

He lies, telling me, "I don't. No."

I won't press him. We have run out of time. Lifting my gaze, I stare at the grateful multitudes. "The infinity button on your armrest will summon me or one of my colleagues. Once we're underway, don't hesitate to press the button." Then before anyone can throw out another good question, I close my eyes, vanishing from their gaze.

Again I hear the word, "Angel."

Julianna says it with an easy reverence.

Tom says nothing. Nothing. He never saw the sky catch fire. He never heard the black warnings, the torrent of hard radiations and fantastic heat chasing after the light. As he was dying in the hospital, his family and friends, doctors and nurses, conspired to keep this one worry from him. Alone among my passengers, Tom was unaware. Innocent.

He's likely grieving for his dead world, a reasonable anger festering inside him.

"Our angel's beautiful," says Julianna. "Don't you think, Tom?"

He shrugs and says, "Very," while his hands continue to wrestle in his lap. He glances across the aisle. One of Jean's babies looks up at him, smiling gamely. Leaning low, Tom whispers to the wide-eyed three-year-old, saying, "Hey there, kid. Hey. So what about this whole crock of shit bothers you the most?"

The early vibrations are honest and important. Space and time are being manipulated by means both decisive and violent. Dimensions without human names are being traversed. For safety's sake, everyone

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must remain in his seat. No exceptions. Tiny variations of mass disrupt the intricate calculations, and our ship is cumbersome enough, thank you.

My team and overseer sit together.

As is customary, we discuss what has happened and what we can anticipate, the overseer nourishing a mood of cautious optimism.

You don't remember, she says to me. You haven't worked with humans long enough. But there was a period when we wondered if this was inevitable. Bringing all of them, I mean. Because they had some brutal weapons, and with a few buttons pushed, they would have killed most of their world.

I show her that I'm listening, thinking hard about what she's telling me. Then, letting my worry show, I ask, How do I respond to certain questions?

She knows which questions. Showing a narrow smile, she asks, Do you think they're likely to ask them?

No, I admit.

Haven't we taken the sensible steps?

Always, I say.

But make yourselves ready, she advises all of us. Examine your manifest. Don't let anyone catch you unprepared.

Easily said. But nobody mentions that each of us, standing alone on the grassy floor, is responsible for thousands upon thousands of souls.

We are successfully underway. People are encouraged to stand if they wish, and if they don't move too far, they may wander. A constant trembling passes through the floor, and from overhead a whispering roar comes, reminding them of a distant and irresistible wind. These are artificial sensations. They bring the sense of motion, of distance won. Sentience doesn't mean sophistication; humans would find the perfect stillness of interstellar travel unnerving, which is why we supply them with every comforting illusion.

Being sophisticated doesn't give me the right to think small thoughts about those who are otherwise.

That's what I remind myself as a thousand fingers call to me.

Wherever I am, I watch Tom. I listen to his voice and the voices swirling around him. In life, the man was a reader. He enjoyed a broad if

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rather haphazard love for science and mathematical puzzles. "Tell me what happened," he says to the English-speaking strangers. "What did you see? Read? Hear? And what do you absolutely know as fact?"

His neighbors have few facts to offer. But that doesn't stop some of them from declaring, "It was God's judgment, plain and simple."

Tom never listens to the plain and simple.

Others repeat the magical word, "Quasar," and shrug their shoulders. "That's what everyone says it was."

Tom explains his doubts. In clear, crisp terms, he teaches dozens of people about the universe and its brutal, amoral past. "Quasars are far away because they live in the deepest past," he explains. Then with grim urgency, he adds, "The part of the sky you're talking about doesn't have a big black hole. It's too close to us. We'd see its gravity at work. And even if something like that was hiding near us, there isn't nearly enough gas and dust to fuel the monster."

Once, then again, I happen by. I show Tom my best smile, and with a warm but firm voice, I suggest that he move back near his seat again. "I'll show you the way," I remark. "Or if you'd rather, I can just put you there."

Tom is a bright, determined skeptic, but he's also a male. His eyes betray interest.

Lust is a vapor that I can inhale, and then enlarge by assorted means, flinging luscious, intoxicating molecules back at the man, feeding his lust until his penis quivers and his breathing comes up short.

After a third visit, the male animal is a little bit in love with me.

On my fourth visit, he stops interrogating the passengers, watching as I deliver a dish of kale and potatoes to a fellow passenger.

The passenger asks, "Do you know how old I am, dear?"

"One hundred and three," I reply, "and your name is Bernice. But your good friends call you Bernie."

With giddy amazement, the old woman says, "Do you know? I outlived three husbands and as many children. But that's fine, because now I'm traveling to Heaven to see them again. Isn't that right, dear?"

I nod. And smile. "Your husbands are there. And your children. And everyone else who made this journey before you." I lift my gaze, smiling only at Tom, forcing him to stare back at me. "How can anything that perfect be anything but beautiful?"

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The male animal licks his lips.

Again I urge Tom to return to his empty seat. But he gathers himself, then tells me, "No," with a cool determination. "No, I want to talk to you. Just to you."

I pretend to misunderstand his intentions.

"Me? Really?" I bubble, letting my nipples engorge.

But the man puts on a cold, uncompromising face and declares "Alone."

He asks, "Is it possible?"

Then with his shoulders squared, he says, "Because if you won't do this, Miss Angel...if you don't pay attention to me, I'm screaming with whatever I've got for lungs...!"

I CAN SEE the man that he seems to be. In an instant, I examine the enormity of Tom's brief life — everything that he has said and done, and everything done and said to him. Obvious strategies present themselves to me, begging to be used. Yet I hesitate. I know better. This man was assaulted by a bus, his belly ripped open, candy-colored guts spilling across the hot black asphalt. For that horrible instant, Tom was conscious. Despite misery and spreading shock, he managed to look at his mangled insides...and what he thought at that particular instant, I do not know. I cannot know: Every soul's thoughts are always its own; no eye can peer into a mind's foggy depths. Which is why the soul is precious. Is worth this kind of sacrifice and expense. What we cannot know perfectly must be preserved, at all costs. That's what this soul-carriage means.

This is what I'll tell him, in some fashion or another.

But he speaks first. "How does this all work?" Tom asks. "You and your angel friends carry the dead off to this heaven place? Is that it?"

We're standing in the chamber where I sat with my colleagues. By all appearances, we are alone.

"Is this your job?" he presses.

"This is my life," I purr. "My purpose. My calling."

Something in those words amuses him. He stares at my face, occasionally glancing at my nipples. Then with a little snort, he asks, "Are there other alien species? And when they die, do you whisk them off to wherever?"

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"There are others, but I don't whisk them anywhere," I explain. "My calling is here, with your noble species."

"You help us travel to the afterlife?"

"Yes."

"And you've always done this?"

"Not always," I confess. "Not for very long, considering."

He doesn't ask the obvious questions. How long? Where did you work before? And why did you change posts? Instead Tom points out, "You won't be making the human run anymore. Will you?"

I say, "No, I won't," with obvious, honest sadness.

Tom nods. Considers.

Then I take hold of our conversation, telling him, "Yes, this is a tragedy. A tragedy. But aren't you just a little pleased to find yourself alive and bound for places that you can't even imagine?"

Dark eyes narrow. Then he calmly and firmly says, "Dolphins."

"What about them?"

"Are their souls saved, too?"

"Of course. Yes."

"And they're riding toward their afterlife...what...? Inside a starship that masquerades as a saltwater lagoon...?"

His guess is rather near the truth.

"There are many species of cetaceans," I explain. "Some are sentient. But others, sadly, have nothing for a soul-saver to latch onto."

I expect Tom to ask about other species. Elephants, dogs, and the like. But he returns to me, remarking, "You're going to have to be reassigned."

"I'll take the calling that suits me," I declare.

He doesn't seem to hear me. His mouth opens, teeth a little crooked and yellowed. Their imperfections make his face seem more handsome. Because it helps my strategy, I fall in love with him. Or is it my strategy that's to blame? Love needs to feel genuine to be love; isn't that what every overseer and every poet claims?

"What killed my world?" he mutters.

I pretend not to understand the question. "Pardon — " I begin.

"It wasn't a quasar," he maintains with a loud, knowing voice. "Or an exploding star. Or anything else normal."

I say nothing.

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He stares at my chest. At the infinity pin riding on my breast. A slow tongue wets his lips, and with his next breath, Tom asks, "Are you a robot?"

"No," I blurt.

"A projection? A fantasy? What?"

This is a perfect moment. With my warm, slightly dampened hand, I touch his chin and then the soft back of his ear, teasing him for a little moment before saying, "I could be any of those things. How would I know? But what I believe I am is an immortal soul, and a good soul...at least good enough to be entrusted with your little species...."

Tom shivers, nods.

I take back my hand.

He wants the hand, and everything else. But he denies himself, almost sobbing when he explains, "I had this professor in college. A brilliant man. He spent an entire class talking about black holes and white holes and wormholes, and how it might be possible to leap through space and time...and all the reasons why you don't want to do it, because of the places where everything could go to shit...."

I could undress myself, and then undress him. I could win this man with a few simple acts of geometry.

Yet I do nothing but listen.

"What happened in the sky...it sounds like a wormhole turning unstable...."

We are alone here. My team and the overseer are busy with the multitudes.

"If it was a wormhole," he tells me, "then that explains why an empty piece of the sky can explode, without warning."

I could lie. And maybe he would believe me.

Or I could take emergency measures, easing Tom into a quarantined region of the ship. He would enjoy himself. He hasn't seen his professor in twenty years; perhaps he would leap at the chance.

But for good reasons, I do something else.

I grasp his hand and lift it easily, straightening his first two fingers, making their brown tips fondle the warm brass of the infinity pin. Beneath the pin, he feels the firm breast. Beneath the breast, a heart drums along. And with a pleading and soft and absolutely honest voice, I beg, "Please, tell nobody. Nobody."

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He tries to lift his hand, but I won't let him.

"There was a malfunction," I confess. "A mistake and a tragedy, and everything's in a shambles. We were caught by surprise. The radiation could have destroyed us before we launched. We haven't nearly enough staff and it's going to be a terribly long, long journey, and please, don't tell anybody what you know." My heart beats; my lungs rise and fall. "Unless you really want to make a mess of things," I concede. "But I don't think...I can't believe, Tom...that there's even a little bit of that kind of man lurking inside you...."

I WATCH HIM, but not as closely now.

In part, I believe we have a pact. An understanding. If I cannot trust this person, then I haven't the skill necessary to do my job, and that is a revelation I'd rather not endure.

Yet more is at work here than trust. I haven't the time or resources to hover beside a lone soul, deciphering his every whisper. The multitudes are begging for delicious meals, and they ask the same few questions, hungry for my smile and my musical reassurances. Many men and the occasional woman hope to see what is beneath my skirt. There is nothing dishonorable in that. A moment's flirt buys a wealth of good tidings and durable hopes. An arm brushing against an arm is the easiest trick. The human face is fluid and rich, capable of its own language, and I've always been adept at making the most from a single expression, from a lifted eyebrow and the flash of my perfect white teeth.

By all appearances, I am relentlessly cheerful and seamlessly kind — an expert in every facet of my endless work. But the real soul always hides behind an impenetrable shroud. Who we are is our only genuine secret, and my secret self grows weary and bored, and in odd ways, terrified.

The children scare me. There are too many babies, too many toddlers. Countless souls whose sentience is minimal by any measure. Older children can be bribed with movies and bright games and the vague promise of greater pleasures to come. But the littlest ones are sociopaths demanding nothing but the undiluted attention of everyone else. They scream and whine and cry, and they build fierce little rages that refuse to die. Out of habit, mothers press them to their breasts, and for a little while,

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they nurse with the same habitual dedication. But diapers remain unsoiled, thankfully; messy old metabolisms were left on the dead world. And after the first long while, the eating habit always falters. Always fails. The adults quit asking for feasts and snacks, and their babies grow tired of drinking without the pleasures of the toilet. The cycle breaks, at least temporarily, and now an equally treasured habit takes hold.

Sleep comes to everyone, or nearly so.

I move among my slumbering souls. Seats have plunged backward, forming beds. The ambient light falls away into a delicious gloom, save for those little pools of colored light where someone fights the urge. Tom is one of the fighters. With bleary, blood-dashed eyes, he sits upright, chin to palm, watching moments culled from his own life. Drifting beside him, my smile goes unnoticed. "She's beautiful," I mention in a whisper.

Tom acts startled. He blinks and takes a quick deep breath — another unnecessary and treasured habit. To prevent misunderstandings, he explains, "She was my mother. She died a few days after this."

"I know that," I promise.

A dark brown woman looks at her son, singing and smiling. She has a beautiful voice perfectly suited for the hymn. God and Christ are her passions. That's plain to see. When she finishes the verse, she stops singing and straightens her hospital gown, and she gasps with a drowning vigor, then kisses her ten-year-old between his blinking and embarrassed eyes.

"Where is she?" he asks.

"Waiting for you," I reply instantly.

But that won't satisfy Tom. He shakes his leaden head, glancing at the girl beside him. At the sleeping Julianna. "What's this place?" he whispers. "This afterlife place...what really happens there...?"

"Imagine," I begin. Then I hold my tongue against the damp roof of my mouth, waiting for his eyes to come around, meeting my fond gaze. Then I say, "Imagine," again. Firmly, as if uttering a command. "Your home will remind you very much of the Earth, and you can build any life for yourself there. Any life you can imagine. Your neighbors will be human souls and alien souls. With a word or a thought, you can learn anything you wish about the universe. Those enduring questions that your college professors could not answer...refused to answer...? They will be transparently obvious, if you wish. With more astonishing questions

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looming behind them, revealing themselves to you for the first time."

An intelligent soul can't help but be seduced by such a promise. Yet Tom buries his curiosity beside his eagerness. Looking only at me, he says, "This place. Whatever you call it. Have you ever actually lived there yourself?"

"No, I haven't."

Then in the next moment, I confess, "I never joined with the Afterlife. Honestly. Honestly, no."

Again, this man continues to surprise me. He nods as if he fully anticipated my answer, as if he already knew all about me. Then he gives his tired eyes a brutal massage, fingers digging at the sockets as he says to me, or maybe to himself, "I don't know what I'm scared of. But I am. Absolutely, rip-shitting scared."

But I am not scared any longer.

Everyone grows bored of sleep, and they wake by the millions. And again I am swimming in my work, answering summonses and the same few precious questions and delivering treats as well as ease-of-mind. I coax children toward their abandoned seats. I explain to harried parents that no, I cannot slip sedatives into milk or cake. Nothing metabolic is happening inside our ship. Hearts and heads are illusions, seamlessly convincing but perfectly unreal. Stripped of meat and blood, souls are invulnerable to every chemical assault. But the same souls can always be distracted, which is why I keep generating great heaps of fancy colored blocks and soft dolls with soft voices, plus intricate, wondrous puzzles that change their nature, always building some new conundrum as the old conundrum collapses under hard scrutiny.

Adults settle into a mood of sturdy contemplation. Of review and reappraisal. Every soul passes through this normally comforting stage. Tom simply arrived early. People are sitting forward in their seats, watching little snatches of their thoroughly recorded lives. Most seek out special days that they've always treasured, and then later, they hunt out moments filled with regrets, weighing what they see now against the emotionally charged events that they've never been able to forget.

For me, this is always the best part of the journey. Not just the easiest, but the most fulfilling. How can it be anything but beautiful, watching the multitude gradually and inexorably come to terms with its enormous past?

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I mention this to my overseer.

She doesn't seem to hear my thoughts.

I am confident, I confess to her. Aren't things going exceptionally well?

She looks at me, and hesitates. Then in an almost glancing fashion, she mentions, Two of your contemplative souls are fighting now. Brawling.

The man with the floppy hat, Quincy, is trading blows with a teenage boy named Gene. They can't hurt each other, but their little mayhem is unseemly. Alarming. And absolutely foolish.

I place myself next to them, and I glare.

They barely notice me. Quincy says, "You son-of-a-bitch liar," and takes a careless swing at the boy's angry face. Gene steps back, avoiding the blow. Then he moves forward, delivering matching blows to the wide soft belly. And Quincy doubles up and crumbles for no better reason than he expects pain. The idea of misery pulls him down to the floor, and curled up like an embryo, he moans. Then with a plaintive and exhausted voice, he says, "You're still." He says, "A son-of-a-bitch liar."

Gene tries to kick the man, but a second foot clips his foot, deflecting it.

I'm standing nearby, watching. What I want is to show everyone else my disapproval. My scalding rage. This is not seemly behavior and I intend to make that point incandescently clear. And then I'll punish both souls, making them look pathetic in front of the others and hopefully putting an end to this particular nonsense.

I am not the agent who stops the fight.

Tom is.

And Tom is the one who barks, "Leave him alone," while stepping between the two combatants. "Back away, and walk away. Okay, son?"

"Liar," Quincy mutters from the safety of the floor.

The boy fumes and spits, then finally looks in my direction. Dark eyes widen until his young face is mostly eyes, and a scared and furious voice says, "Bitch. You. You did it to our world, didn't you?"

For too long, I say nothing.

"Enough," is what Tom tells him.

Then I manage to ask, "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

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"I heard. I know." The young man's anger is seamless and irresistible. "Your damned machines are what killed us all! Isn't that right, bitch?"

What I need to say is perfectly obvious.

"You are mistaken," I tell him.

Then to everyone in earshot, I say, "Someone must have lied to you. Or you heard things wrong."

"See?" Quincy moans. "Told you!"

Then I give Tom a good hard stare. Waiting for him to look at me. Waiting for some trace of shame. But the man simply stands motionless, hands at his sides, wearing a sturdy expression that implies concentration, and concern, as his eyes rise, looking into my gaze, those staring eyes telling me:

No, I did not. I did not. I did not.

My team and overseer are waiting for me.

Who did you bring with you? the overseer asks.

Everyone, I say.

But she sees that for herself. I'm holding tight to several hundred souls — everyone who might have seen the fight or heard the ugly rumor — and Tom is at the front of the heap, saying to the old woman's face, "Like I told your girl here. It wasn't me."

Is the damage contained? the overseer asks me.

I believe so, yes. I heard nothing else from anywhere else, and nobody except Quincy and Gene spoke about our complicity.

Complicity? the overseer responds.

Yes, I say. What else is it?

She looks at Tom. "What did you tell the others?"

"Nothing," he promises.

The overseer searches the seating charts, and then summons Julianna. With a warning sneer, she asks the girl, "What did Tom tell you?"

"About what?" Julianna asks. She acts nervous, but no more than anyone who is in the presence of someone important. "He told me about the bus hitting him. About a thousand times, he told me that story." Then she glances at Tom, adding, "You're dead. Okay? So get over it!"

"What were those two men fighting about?" the overseer asks.

Julianna shrugs and says, "Who knows?"

"You don't know?"

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"Something about how the Earth died." Again, she shrugs. Then she grudgingly admits, "Yeah, I heard talk. Whispers, mostly. They were saying — "

"Who was speaking — ?"

"People. Three, four seats over. This kid was standing there — "

"This child?" The overseer shows her Gene. "Is this the one?"

Julianna says, "No," without a shred of doubt. "It was a younger kid. He was talking about how the Earth died. He heard it from some angel — "

"Do you see that boy here? Anywhere?"

Julianna looks at the souls that I brought with me. She is thorough and slow, shaking her head when she finishes, telling us, "He was moving through, I think. On foot. He said he wanted to see as many people as possible before we got where we were going — "

Search for this boy! the overseer cries out.

It takes an instant, and too long. A teammate retrieves the boy and places him in front of us. He is a Sikh, perhaps thirteen years old. He is handsome and bright-eyed and a little fearless. When asked, he is nothing but forthright about what he knows. "The explosion came when a shipment of souls were taken away. Their wormhole turned unstable — "

"Who told you this?" the overseer demands to know.

The boy looks at my team, lifts his arm in my direction, and then points at the man-angel beside me.

My colleague collapses, and sobs, saying, "I did not. I told you — "

"That my calculations were wrong." The boy smiles with genuine pride, then tells the overseer, "I like math and relativity. Neat things like that. I watched the fire in the sky, and did calculations, and I told this angel that it made sense, if our ship employs some kind of superluminal transportation system — "

The boy has walked a very long distance. In the general confusion, he went unnoticed. Each of us is to blame and we know it, and by every means available we look back along his likely course, listening to everything that's being said. Particularly to the whispers.

"And they were wrong," he confesses. "My math was. I wasn't taking into account the effects of — "

A million whispers wash over me.

"They murdered our world," the multitudes are telling each other.

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"The angels slaughtered us all...!"

I feel horrible. Wicked, and weak. Useless. And doomed.

Then Tom steps forward, looking only at me. "It wouldn't kill you to apologize to me," he says. "But before you get around to that, maybe you experts should figure out what you're going to do next. Now that this tiger's crawled out of her bag."

AGAIN, I STAND before my souls.

My shoulders slump, and I consciously keep my face from showing anything that might be confused for a smile. I am apologetic. Contrite. Hands opened, palms upturned, I bow before thousands of glowering faces, and with a hurting voice admit, "It's all true. This rumor that you're hearing...that we tried to keep from you...it is true, and it is awful, and perhaps it would help if you took out your anger on me...."

I tell them, "Attack me. Brutalize me. Do whatever you wish to me and to my body, please."

Of course, no one moves. Or remembers to breathe. With others watching, even the most vicious soul is incapable of acting on his worst impulses.

I kneel. Dip my sorry head. Wait.

Then I raise my head, looking through genuine tears. "I don't know who built the wormholes," I admit, "or if they were the same entities who built this place where you are being taken now. I don't even know what you are feeling now. Souls are sanctuaries. Citadels with windows but no gates. Each of you feels hatred and rage and a choking sense of betrayal that I can only imagine, and all I can do is remind you, each of you...remind you that for ten million years, creatures such as I have been saving your ancestors whenever they perished...whisking them to immortality...and without our hard labor, your souls and their souls would have been thrown away by this enormous and very extraordinarily cruel universe...."

Faces stare. Even the children sense the importance of my words, if not what the words mean.

"As promised," I continue, "you may live as you wish in this safe place. In this heaven. Which means that if you desire it, you may rebuild the Earth that you've left. Every brick in its place. Every mote of dust and

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blue river and the towering mountains and the scuttling beetles. Every little feature can be made real again, and you will return to your old lives. Which, I might add, is not that unusual for a species in your particular circumstance."

That brings a roaring silence.

"Build a new Earth," I tell them. "But this time, the sky doesn't explode. You will grow up and grow old and die, each in your own time. And that's when each of you discovers that you're already living in your afterlife."

The silence quiets. Grows reflective.

"Which reminds me," I mention, casually but not. And again, I show my smile. "It has been suggested...suggested by better minds than mine...that every living world and every conscious mind always exists in someone's heaven...and Death simply moves each of us along an endless chain of Heavens....

"Now isn't it pretty to think so...?"

"How's the general mood?" Tom asks.

I am back in the chamber again. It is just the two of us, again.

"Better?" he asks.

"Better," I admit. Then I give him a look, and too late by long ways, I tell him, "I'm sorry for suspecting you — "

"No need for apologies," he remarks, laughing mildly.

Then before I speak again, he mentions, "It seems you can use some help. You're so thin, and there's so many people out there...I'm just thinking that maybe it would be best to pull a few passengers out of their seats and train them fast and give them little duties they can't screw up too badly — "

"Are you interested in that work?" I ask.

The man doesn't answer me. Not immediately or directly, he won't. But his dark eyes grow distant now, and with a distracted voice, he explains, "I was in the hospital, dying. And thinking about everything. My life. Its purpose, and its worth, and all the usual bullshit. Then they were wheeling me down the hallway...and I was sure that I was dying...and what I kept thinking, over and over, was that the orderly pushing the gurney had the best job in the universe. You know? Bearing the dead along like that. It just seemed so natural. So lovely. I just felt envious, all of a

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sudden. And that was my last thought. My only thought, really. I just wished that in my life I could have done something simple and noble like that guy got to do every damned day...."

I stare at him. And I wait.

"You never actually entered that afterlife place," he says to me. "Did you?"

"Never."

"Is that typical of your profession?"

"It is," I confess. "You don't happen upon many souls who wish to leave, once they're actually there."

He nods. Sucks on his teeth. And finally, looking into my eyes, he says, "Well," with a deft finality. He says, "I never believed in that place anyway." And he smiles, touching me, squeezing my elbow with one damp hand while the other hand fingers that symbol of boundless forever.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Evening's Empire, by David Herter, Tor Books, 2002, $24.95.

THERE'S nothing quite so exciting as reading a good book by a new (or at least unfamiliar to you) author. You have no expectations, no preconceptions from other books the author has written as to how this one might go. The story can take you anywhere. This is especially true when reading a galley where you don't even have a cover illustration to give you a hint as to what waits for you inside.

That's how I came to David Herter's *Evening's Empire*, with nothing but the hope of a good read. He's the author of a previous sf novel, *Ceres Storm*, but apparently this novel is his first foray into contemporary fantasy and what a fine job he's done of it.

The book opens with the arrival of composer Russell Kent to the small coastal town of Evening, Oregon. Evening's claim to fame is its cheese, but it has a darker significance for Kent. Two years previously he and his wife stopped there on a whim. They went for a walk on the cliffs behind an elegant Queen mansion that overlooks the town and there his wife fell to her death.

Kent is haunted by nightmares of her death. Hoping to put her ghost to rest, and needing a quiet place to write a commissioned opera based on Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Kent returns to Evening and takes up residence in the town's one bed & breakfast, operated by Megan Sumner.

But there are strange doings in Evening, as Kent soon discovers.

At this point the book could have gone one of two ways: the horror route, or that curious form of contemporary fantasy previously staked out by the likes of James Blaylock and Tim Powers.

With its quirky characters and hidden histories, we soon discover that Herter opted for the latter.

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Evening, it turns out, was settled by one Joseph Evening in an area that, unlike the surrounding landscape, has not collected any legends or folktales. The local Natives avoided the area, calling it "the Land of the Gray Owl." But Evening believed there was a great secret hidden under the town that came to bear his name, and while the making and selling of cheese is the obvious concern of most of the town's inhabitants, they have also been digging a route to what they believe is an underground city since they first settled here, many, many decades ago.

Kent doesn't learn of this immediately. At first he only catches the periphery of oddness that pervades the town. He's too busy making peace with the ghost of his wife and working on his opera. But the mystery takes hold of him, surely and with an ever-tightening grip, the longer he stays.

He finds affection, cheese sculptures, and strange little societies such as the Storm Watchers and the Anti-Cheese League who are at odds with one another. There appear to be connections between the townsfolk's secrets and the death of his wife. Jules Verne's books are also involved. Small men in black coats seem to be watching him. An artifact that appears to have no earthly origin is washed ashore and into Kent's hands.

David Herter pulls it all together with a deft sure hand. His prose is a delight and his characters fascinating. And I really loved the way that his composer Kent "hears" colors and, with his perfect pitch, can catalog the tone of a sound.

The first two thirds of the book is absolutely charming. After that, as the mystery begins to unravel... it's not that *Evening's Empire* falters so much as that it seems to lose steam. I can't quite put my finger on what it is — or at least what it was for this reader. I didn't dislike the last third of the book — in fact, I read through it quite quickly, drawn by that need that every author hopes to cultivate: his or her readers' need to find out what happens next.

The trouble is, as continuingly strange and intriguing as the revealed mystery is, it still felt somewhat mundane. And, at least in my reading of it, there was no real payoff in terms of the push and pull of the various characters' relationships as set up in the earlier portions.

None of which, I hope, will stop you from reading the book. There is far more to praise in *Evening's Empire* than to criticize. It's true that I couldn't help but be

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a little disappointed that its early promise of wonder and character depth, sustained through most of the book, didn't resolve with a similar flair and innovation. Yet even if the end doesn't quite measure up to Herter's ambitions, at least he made the effort to break some new ground. And mostly he succeeded.

Wolf's Head, Wolf's Heart, by Jane Lindskold, Tor Books, 2002, $27.95.

One thing I like about Jane Lindskold's books is that she plays fair with her readers. It doesn't matter that she's writing a series; each book will still stand on its own and be a satisfying read, for all that it adds depth and texture to what went before. That might seem like an odd thing to be grateful for, but one of the reasons I don't read many series books is that I grew tired of coming to the end of some five-hundred-page book only to find that the immediate story didn't end and I'd have to wait a year or more to find out what happens next.

I still have to wait a year between Lindskold's titles, but at least she hasn't left me hanging — though she does always leave me wanting to read more, the way any good writer does.

In last year's *Through Wolf's Eyes* we were introduced to Firekeeper, a young woman raised by intelligent wolves; she might or might not be the heir to a human kingdom. The novel proved to be equal parts feral child novel (where we get to see civilization through the eyes of someone raised outside its boundaries) and one centering around complicated political intrigues. It ended in a war that rearranged the ruling houses of Lindskold's world and set Firekeeper's place in civilization.

But, as we discover in the opening of *Wolf's Head, Wolf's Heart*, one of the ousted rulers took with her three magical artifacts that were supposed to remain under lock and key in her former kingdom. At the same time Firekeeper is summoned back to the lands where she grew up by a council of Royal Animals, the intelligent beasts who first held this land before man came into it and to which her own pack of intelligent wolves belongs.

The council charges Firekeeper with the task of finding and retrieving these artifacts. So she sets out, with some of her human and Royal Animal friends we met in the first book, on a journey to bordering New Kelvin to do just that.

New Kelvin appears to be somewhat based on Japanese culture, a

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land of complicated interactions between people, where magic is revered and everyone wears Kabuki-like face-paint. It's a fascinating place, one that I don't doubt we'll see more of in future Firekeeper novels, and it provides a powerful backdrop for much of the action of this book.

I don't want to go into too much detail about the plot, or how it unfolds — much of the pleasure of the read is untangling the skein of treacheries and political maneuvering — but I will tell you that Lindskold once again provides a very satisfying conclusion, while allowing hints for possible future stories in the series. Her prose is clean, her dialog sharp, and she well understands the fine balance between exploring a new world and moving the plot forward.

Other series writers might take note of how well this approach works. For one thing, *Wolf's Head, Wolf's Heart* is as good as, if not better than, the previous book, unlike so many trilogies where the second book is the weakest part of the whole.

All in all, it's a strong addition to the Firekeeper series in particular, and Lindskold's body of work in general.

A number of readers have written to me concerning my review of Daniel Quinn's *The Man Who Grew Young* in the February 2002 installment of this column, pointing out other stories and books that use the same concept of a man living backward through time rather than forward. But while a fair number of other takes on the subject were listed, the one that got the most mentions was "The Man Who Never Grew Young" by Fritz Leiber.

And it's a wonderful story, with an original copyright date of 1947 (although Dark Harvest's *The Leiber Chronicles*, where I tracked down my copy, cites it as 1949), and I was surprised that I hadn't read it before. I'd recommend the story to you, as I'd recommend all of Leiber's work. He was a wonderful writer, inventive and gifted, who left us many fine stories and books; like Roger Zelazny and so many of the other giants in our field, his absence is still keenly felt.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque, by Jeffrey Ford, William Morrow, 2002, $24.95.

The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories, by Jeffrey Ford, Golden Gryphon, 2002, $23.95.

The Eyre Affair, by Jasper Fforde, Viking, 2001, $23.95.

Whole Wide World, by Paul McAuley, Tor, 2002, $25.95.

JEFFREY Ford is one of that growing body of writers who seem to be stateless, nonetheless moving about at ease on travel papers issued by fantasy, the mystery/thriller, and capital-l Literature. Regular readers of this magazine will know him for stories like "The Honeyed Knot" and "The Fantasy Writer's Apprentice." An earlier novel, *The Physiognomy*, won the World Fantasy Award. But to call Ford a fantasist can be misleading, as might be a cursory glance through earlier novels with their mysterious cities, clashes of good and evil, demons and sleeping diseases, conflation of internal and external landscapes. A fantasist, yes — but a fantasist in the manner of Gene Wolfe or John Crowley. A world-eater, a world-maker.

The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque, too, set in 1893 New York, is fantasy. It is also a mystery, a tale of terror, and an amazingly evocative historical novel recreating in texture, form, and tone the literature of its period.

Society portraitist Piero Piambo has reached something of a crisis in his career. Wealthy and successful, he is troubled by memories of the greater ambitions he once had, and of his old master Sabott. Then, from a blind messenger in the street, he receives the invitation that will lead to his next commission. He is ushered into a magnificent home of marble columns and crystal lamps. From behind a three-panel screen, a woman speaks.

"You will visit me here, sit

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before my screen, and ask me questions about myself. From the information I give, my voice and my stories, you will construct in your mind an image of me, which you will then render on canvas."

As Piambo pursues that image, a number of deaths occur about London, deaths in which women appear to weep blood. Soon enough, mysterious Mrs. Charbuque is telling him of her father, a crystalogogist, a man who embalmed snowflakes in order to divine the future from them. Soon, too, Piambo has consulted another sort of diviner, one who claims to have foreseen his arrival "in the results of Monday's lamb stew" and bemoans that "People fear the truth of the chamberpot. They have no idea how old and venerable a tradition divination through evacuants is...." It's all smoke and mirrors, all an elaborate dance. But the mirrors, like the furnishings of Mrs. Charbuque's home, are fine ones, the smoke, like that of the opium to which Piambo's friend Shenz is addicted, is exceedingly rich, and the pipers who play for the dance are the best in the land.

Soon enough into the dance, part smoke, part mirror, trips the supposedly dead Mr. Charbuque. Holding a knife to Piambo's neck from behind, he demands to know why the painter is seeing his wife, and at the explanation cries out: *You are lost.*

Every portrait, master Sabott once told Piambo, in some sense is a self-portrait. But everywhere Piambo turns — world, representation, or reflection — he sees only himself: in the connection between Mrs. Charbuque's loss of her father and his loss of master Sabott, in the work of one of his own students, in Shenz's assertion that "My talent drips off me and streams away in rivulets, my desire to paint evaporates more with each hour, my heart is cold to the whole endeavor."

For all our art, for all our intelligence-gathering, we remain, all of us, mysteries to one another, and to ourselves.

Publication of *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* is seconded by Golden Gryphon's collection *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*, bringing together sixteen stories from the past eight years. Michael Swanwick provides a fine introduction.

It's Ford's range that first stands out. A handful of the stories, "Pansolapia," say, or "Something by the Sea," are dreamlike parables in the manner of Buzzati, Landolfi,

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or (as the final, self-referential story, "Bright Morning," blusteringly affirms) Kafka. Several such as "Exo-Skeleton Town" and "Floating in Lindrethool," though hardly straightforward, are patently science fiction, while "The Delicate" and "At Reparata" reflect the fascination with high fantasy that so informed Ford's trilogy. In others such as "The Honeyed Knot" and "Bright Morning" there's a powerful *à clef* strain. Here, Ford begins with feet planted squarely in his own life; only some time later does the reader look up to notice they've strayed together well off the path.

Finally it's not Ford's facility that impresses, not his deftness at unspooling the story or creating atmosphere, so much as it is the sureness of his voice — and his reach. His stories, his language, refuse to do the expected, are always groping toward something larger, something ultimately inexpressible, reaching for those miracles that are the very touchstone of our daily lives.

In *this* 1985 (1984 plus 1, right?), Britain is still fighting the Crimean War, after 130 years. The Soviet Union never came into being but there's a People's Republic of Wales. There are no computers, and long-distance trips are undertaken by dirigible. Other trips, through time, are routine, though closely regulated, and people keep genetically regenerated dodos as pets. And oh, yes: the whole world's absolutely gaga over literature. There's a great black market in original manuscripts, fans reenact famous artistic controversies and change their names to those of writers (Tennyson is a particular favorite), terrorists rally under the banner of Jane Austen. The same production of *Richard III* has been going on for fifteen years. There is no cast; members of the audience who've seen the play so many times they know it by heart are pulled at the last moment and put on stage.

This is the setting for *The Eyre Affair*, a campy, whimsical, wonderfully entertaining first novel by Jasper Fforde.

Thursday Next, narrator, heroine, savior of the world, is a veteran of the Crimean War. (Her brother, who died in it, is generally held responsible for the debacle of the Charge of the Light Brigade.) As an operative for the London-based Literary Detective Division of the Special Operations Network, her job is to track down stolen manuscripts and sort out forgeries.

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Thursday's proves quite a family. Her father is a lapsed ChronoGuard now waging guerilla warfare against the Office of Temporal Stability. Her uncle Mycroft is an inventor whose credits include a means of faxing pizzas, a pencil with spellcheck, and translating carbon paper. ("Did the memory erasure device work, Uncle?" Thursday asks at one point. "Don't know what you're talking about, dear girl," he responds.) Uncle Mycroft also invented the Prose Portal, a device capable of propelling people into the pages of books or extracting characters from same. When the Portal falls into the hands of Acheron Hades, former professor of literature gone splendidly mad, Thursday — whose aunt Polly finds herself trapped in Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud" — is drafted to help. Because, you see, she is not only a survivor of the Crimean War, but of Hades's classroom as well.

Following the warmup exercise of excising a minor character from Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Acheron Hades next kidnaps Jane Eyre. In order to save both Jane and the novel, Thursday must go into the book — and enlist the help of Mr. Rochester.

There's much, much more: a gigantic corporation named Goliath with its own ruthless agent, one Jack Schitt; bookworms that power the Portal from the contents of books threaded into their DNA; Thesaurus Maggots; Thursday speeding backtime in a roadster to put an earlier self on alert; great names, a myriad allusions, jokes, pickle barrels of puns, shaggy dogs. The whole thing's as silly as can be, but always great fun.

Capital-l Literature? Hardly. Genre fiction? Confirmed readers of science fiction (many of whom tend toward earnestness) may throw up their arms or recoil in horror. Satire and pastiche? Of itself as much as anything (or should I say everything?) else. Here's a sandwich of epic proportions made from leftovers of high and low culture: PDQ Bach playing Mahler on piccolo, tongue firmly in cheek, Karl Marx as contestant on "Let's Make a Deal."

Somewhere perhaps half a decade further along, 2005 or so, in a London festooned with security cameras and overseen by "an intelligence vast and cold and unsympathetic," a young woman's murder by a man wearing a Margaret Thatcher mask is broadcast on the Internet, on www, which one character's daughter deems "the

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whole wide world." It's a world in which Thatcher's repression on one small island struck and caught like flint in tinder. Cuba, still sanctioned by Great Britain, is a free information country. Britain is not.

"[T]hey put in the black boxes and the RIP cutters," a friend tells policeman-narrator Dixon, "and then they passed the Internet Regulation and Content Control Act and they passed the Protection of Children Act, and I thought, it's like Prohibition. Keep your head down and it'll go away. But then the InfoWar made things worse because it gave the Decency Leaguers and the Little Englanders a real enemy, an excuse to pitch the whole country back to 1950. Single-sex schools, chastity pledges...."

That same InfoWar brought narrator Dixon low. Having witnessed rape and murder on the part of fellow policemen, upon surviving he's been sacrificed to the department's image, tucked away (safely, it's thought) in a fetch-and-carry cul-de-sac. But precisely *what* he fetches and carries, Dixon decides, will be up to him. He'll bring the killer of the girl in the silver chair to justice. And in the great private-detective, maverick-with-wound-and-bow, knight-of-the-streets tradition sallies forth.

So begins Paul McAuley's *Whole Wide World.*

Each era, I suspect, finds its way to a distinctive popular voice, some form or mode uniquely suited to the time's self-image, deeper need, and anxieties. Victorian England had its penny dreadfuls, the U.S.'s placid Fifties gave rise to subversive science-fiction films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and original paperbacks by such as David Goodis and Jim Thompson. "These novels, and the covers that illustrate them, speak of the ignoble corners of life beyond the glow of Jane Powell, 'Father Knows Best,' and the healthy, smiling faces in magazines advertising milk or frozen dinners or trips to California," Geoffrey O'Brien wrote in *Hardboiled America.*

Increasingly I've come to wonder if the form of the thriller, with its massive engines set in motion and grinding on far beyond personal lives and ken, provisional realities imploding page by page, and lives gone horizontal rather than vertical, may not best define and serve our time.

From the evidence of *Whole Wide World,* Paul McAuley may agree. Previous work has dealt with direct scientific extrapolation and with far-future environs; this one,

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he plays alarmingly close to the vest. The writing, too, as in this opening description of a run in the park, is up close and personal.

"Sunday, early June. The sky hazy as if bandaged in gauze, the sun burning through it like the business end of a welder's torch. According to the watch Julie had given me the previous Christmas, it was eighty-eight degrees. It felt hotter. People in various states of undress sprawled on browning grass like a horde of refugees from one of the European microwars. I was aware of the brief snags and thorns of their drowsy inattention as I ran past."

Or this description of a neighborhood bar:

"It was midweek, midevening. Half a dozen hardened drinkers clung to the bar like limpets at the edge of a tide pool; a TV hanging over the raked bottles was showing the highlights of a Slovenian tree-felling contest."

That caricature mask of Thatcher's face and the notion that people, like technology, exist only to be used, run throughout McAuley's grim and graceful novel with its rushing, subterranean river of paranoia, its catacombs of bone beneath the too-solid flesh of tomorrow's London.

We should not be so surprised that Big Brother is watching, McAuley says. Because He can, He will; little escape from that. And it's really no great problem as long as all our uncles and Aunt Pollys are able to watch as well. Remember Gully Foyle in Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* giving up to the general populace the secret of universal destruction? That same sword-point is the fulcrum here.

Information wants to be free, Dixon's T-shirt reads when he's pulled from his run to the murder scene in *Whole Wide World*'s first chapter — pulled like the reader from free fall, glide and distraction, pulled into a maelstrom from which neither of us is likely to recover but which, with luck and the kind of heroic intransigence demonstrated by Dixon, we may yet survive.

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After too long an absence, Bruce Sterling returns to our pages with a timely tale of poetry and politics. Mr. Sterling reports that his next book, a work of speculative nonfiction entitled Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years *will be out in December.*

In Paradise

By Bruce Sterling

THE MACHINES BROKE DOWN so much that it was comical, but the security people never laughed about that.

Felix could endure the delay, for plumbers billed by the hour. He opened his tool kit, extracted a plastic flask and had a solid nip of Scotch.

The Moslem girl was chattering into her phone. Her dad and another bearded weirdo had passed through the big metal frame just as the scanner broke down. So these two somber, suited old men were getting the full third degree with the hand wands, while daughter was stuck. Daughter wore a long baggy coat and thick black headscarf and a surprisingly sexy pair of sandals. Between her and her minders stretched the no man's land of official insecurity. She waved across the gap.

The security geeks found something metallic in the black wool jacket of the Wicked Uncle. Of course it was harmless, but they had to run their full ritual, lest they die of boredom at their posts. As the Scotch settled in, Felix felt time stretch like taffy. Little Miss Mujihadeen discovered that her phone was dying. She banged at it with the flat of her hand.

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The line of hopeful shoppers, grimly waiting to stimulate the economy, shifted in their disgruntlement. It was a bad, bleak scene. It crushed Felix's heart within him. He longed to leap to his feet and harangue the lot of them. *Wake up,* he wanted to scream at them, *cheer up, act more human.* He felt the urge keenly, but it scared people when he cut loose like that. They really hated it. And so did he. He knew he couldn't look them in the eye. It would only make a lot of trouble.

The Mideastern men shouted at the girl. She waved her dead phone at them, as if another breakdown was going to help their mood. Then Felix noticed that she shared his own make of cell phone. She had a rather ahead-of-the-curve Finnish model that he'd spent a lot of money on. So Felix rose and sidled over.

"Help you out with that phone, ma'am?"

She gave him the paralyzed look of a coed stuck with a dripping tap. "No English?" he concluded. "Habla español, senorita?" No such luck.

He offered her his own phone. No, she didn't care to use it. Surprised and even a little hurt by this rejection, Felix took his first good look at her, and realized with a lurch that she was pretty. What eyes! They were whirlpools. The line of her lips was like the tapered edge of a rose leaf.

"It's your battery," he told her. Though she had not a word of English, she obviously got it about phone batteries. After some gestured persuasion, she was willing to trade her dead battery for his. There was a fine and delicate little moment when his fingertips extracted her power supply, and he inserted his own unit into that golden-lined copper cavity. Her display leapt to life with an eager flash of numerals. Felix pressed a button or two, smiled winningly, and handed her phone back.

She dialed in a hurry, and bearded Evil Dad lifted his phone to answer, and life became much easier on the nerves. Then, with a groaning buzz, the scanner came back on. Dad and Uncle waved a command at her, like lifers turned to trusty prison guards, and she scampered through the metal gate and never looked back.

She had taken his battery. Well, no problem. He would treasure the one she had given him.

Felix gallantly let the little crowd through before he himself cleared security. The geeks always went nuts about his plumbing tools, but then again, they had to. He found the assignment: a chi-chi place that sold fake

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antiques and potpourri. The manager's office had a clogged drain. As he worked, Felix recharged the phone. Then he socked them for a sum that made them wince.

On his leisurely way out — whoa, there was Miss Cell phone, that looker, that little goddess, browsing in a jewelry store over Korean gold chains and tiaras. Dad and Uncle were there, with a couple of off-duty cops.

Felix retired to a bench beside the fountain, in the potted plastic plants. He had another bracing shot of Scotch, then put his feet up on his toolbox and punched her number.

He saw her straighten at the ring, and open her purse, and place the phone to the kerchiefed side of her head. She didn't know where he was, or who he was. That was why the words came pouring out of him.

"My God you're pretty," he said. "You are wasting your time with that jewelry. Because your eyes are like two black diamonds."

She jumped a little, poked at the phone's buttons with disbelief, and put it back to her head.

Felix choked back the urge to laugh and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "A string of pearls around your throat would look like peanuts," he told the phone. "I am totally smitten with you. What are you like under that big baggy coat? Do I dare to wonder? I would give a million dollars just to see your knees!"

"Why are you telling me that?" said the phone.

"Because I'm looking at you right now. And after one look at you, believe me, I was a lost soul." Felix felt a chill. "Hey, wait a minute — you don't speak English, do you?"

"No, I don't speak English — but my telephone does."

"It *does*?"

"It's a very new telephone. It's from Finland," the telephone said. "I need it because I'm stuck in a foreign country. Do you really have a million dollars for my knees?"

"That was a figure of speech," said Felix, though his bank account was, in point of fact, looking considerably healthier since his girlfriend Lola had dumped him. "Never mind the million dollars," he said. "I'm dying of love out here. I'd sell my blood just to buy you petunias."

"You must be a famous poet," the phone said dreamily, "for you speak such wonderful Farsi."

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Felix had no idea what Farsi was — but he was way beyond such fretting now. The rusty gates of his soul were shuddering on their hinges. "I'm drunk," he realized. "I am drunk on your smile."

"In my family, the women never smile."

Felix had no idea what to say to that, so there was a hissing silence.

"Are you a spy? How did you get my phone number?"

"I'm not a spy. I got your phone number from your phone."

"Then I know you. You must be that tall foreign man who gave me your battery. Where are you?"

"Look outside the store. See me on the bench?" She turned where she stood, and he waved his fingertips. "That's right, it's me," he declared to her. "I can't believe I'm really going through with this. You just stand there, okay? I'm going to run in there and buy you a wedding ring."

"Don't do that." She glanced cautiously at Dad and Uncle, then stepped closer to the bulletproof glass. "Yes, I do see you. I remember you."

She was looking straight at him. Their eyes met. They were connecting. A hot torrent ran up his spine. "You are looking straight at me."

"You're very handsome."

IT WASN'T HARD to elope. Young women had been eloping since the dawn of time. Elopement with eager phone support was a snap. He followed her to the hotel, a posh place that swarmed with limos and videocams. He brought her a bag with a big hat, sunglasses, and a cheap Mexican wedding dress. He sneaked into the women's restroom — they never put videocams there, due to the complaints — and he left the bag in a stall. She went in, came out in new clothes with her hair loose, and walked straight out of the hotel and into his car.

They couldn't speak together without their phones, but that turned out to be surprisingly advantageous, as further discussion was not on their minds. Unlike Lola, who was always complaining that he should open up and relate — "You're a plumber," she would tell him, "how deep and mysterious is a plumber supposed to be?" — the new woman in his life had needs that were very straightforward. She liked to walk in parks without a police escort. She liked to thoughtfully peruse the goods in Mideastern

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ethnic groceries. And she liked to make love to him. She was nineteen years old, and the willing sacrifice of her chastity had really burned the bridges for his little refugee. Once she got fully briefed about what went inside where, she was in the mood to tame the demon. She had big, jagged, sobbing, alarming, romantic, brink-of-the-grave things going on, with long, swoony kisses, and heel-drumming, and clutching-and-clawing.

When they were too weak, and too raw, and too tingling to make love any more, then she would cook, very badly. She was on her phone constantly, talking to her people. These confidantes of hers were obviously women, because she asked them for Persian cooking tips. She would sink with triumphant delight into cheery chatter as the Basmati rice burned.

He longed to take her out to eat; to show her to everyone, to the whole world; really, besides the sex, no act could have made him happier — but she was undocumented, and sooner or later some security geek was sure to check on that. People did things like that to people nowadays. To contemplate such things threw a thorny darkness over their whole affair, so, mostly, he didn't think. He took time off work, and he spent every moment that he could in her radiant presence, and she did what a pretty girl could do to lift a man's darkened spirits, which was plenty. More than he had ever had from anyone.

After ten days of golden, unsullied bliss, ten days of bread and jug wine, ten days when the nightingales sang in chorus and the reddest of roses bloomed outside the boudoir, there came a knock on his door, and it was three cops.

"Hello, Mr. Hernandez," said the smallest of the trio. "I would be Agent Portillo from Homeland Security, and these would be two of my distinguished associates. Might we come in?"

"Would there be a problem?" said Felix.

"Yes there would!" said Portillo. "There might be rather less of a problem if my associates here could search your apartment." Portillo offered up a handheld screen. "A young woman named Batool Kadivar? Would we be recognizing Miss Batool Kadivar?"

"I can't even pronounce that," Felix said. "But I guess you'd better come in," for Agent Portillo's associates were already well on their way.

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Men of their ilk were not prepared to take no for an answer. They shoved past him and headed at once for the bedroom.

"Who are those guys? They're not American."

"They're Iranian allies. The Iranians were totally nuts for a while, and then they were sort of okay, and then they became our new friends, and then the enemies of our friends became our friends.... Do you ever watch TV news, Mr. Hernandez? Secular uprisings, people seizing embassies? Ground war in the holy city of Qom, that kind of thing?"

"It's hard to miss," Felix admitted.

"There are a billion Moslems. If they want to turn the whole planet into Israel, we don't get a choice about that. You know something? I used to be an accountant!" Portillo sighed theatrically. "'Homeland Security.' Why'd they have to stick me with that chicken outfit? Hombre, we're twenty years old, and we don't even have our own budget yet. Did you see those gorillas I've got on my hands? You think these guys ever listen to sense? Geneva Convention? U.S. Constitution? Come on."

"They're not gonna find any terrorists in here."

Portillo sighed again. "Look, Mr. Hernandez. You're a young man with a clean record, so I want to do you a favor." He adjusted his handheld and it showed a new screen. "These are cell phone records. Thirty, forty calls a day, to and from your number. Then look at this screen, this is the good part. Check out *her* call records. That would be her aunt in Yerevan, and her little sister in Teheran, and five or six of her teenage girlfriends, still living back in purdah.... Who do you think is gonna *pay* that phone bill? Did that ever cross your mind?"

Felix said nothing.

"I can understand this, Mr. Hernandez. You lucked out. You're a young, red-blooded guy and that is a very pretty girl. But she's a minor, and an illegal alien. Her father's family has got political connections like nobody's business, and I would mean nobody, and I would also mean business."

"Not my business," Felix said.

"You're being a sap, Mr. Hernandez. You may not be interested in war, but war is plenty interested in you." There were loud crashing, sacking and looting noises coming from his bedroom.

"You are sunk, hermano. There is video at the Lebanese grocery store.

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There is video hidden in the traffic lights. You're a free American citizen, sir. You're free to go anywhere you want, and we're free to watch all the backup tapes. That would be the big story I'm relating here. Would we be catching on yet?"

"That's some kind of story," Felix said.

"You don't know the half of it. You don't know the tenth."

The two goons reappeared. There was a brief exchange of notes. They had to use their computers.

"My friends here are disappointed," said Agent Portillo, "because there is no girl in your residence, even though there is an extensive selection of makeup and perfume. They want me to arrest you for abduction, and obstruction of justice, and probably ten or twelve other things. But I would be asking myself: why? Why should this young taxpayer with a steady job want to have his life ruined? What I'm thinking is: there must be *another* story. A *better* story. The flighty girl ran off, and she spent the last two weeks in a convent. It was just an impulse thing for her. She got frightened and upset by America, and then she came back to her people. Everything diplomatic."

"That's diplomacy?"

"Diplomacy is the art of avoiding extensive unpleasantness for all the parties concerned. The united coalition, as it were."

"They'll chop her hands off and beat her like a dog!"

"Well, that would depend, Mr. Hernandez. That would depend entirely on whether the girl herself tells that story. Somebody would have to get her up to speed on all that. A trusted friend. You see?"

AFTER THE DEPARTURE of the three security men, Felix thought through his situation. He realized there was nothing whatsoever in it for him but shame, humiliation, impotence, and a crushing and lasting unhappiness. He then fetched up the reposado tequila from beneath his sink.

Some time later he felt the dulled stinging of a series of slaps to his head. When she saw that she had his attention, she poured the tequila onto the floor, accenting this gesture with an eye-opening Persian harangue. Felix staggered to the bathroom, threw up, and returned to find a fresh cup of coffee. She had raised the volume and was still going strong.

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He'd never had her pick a lovers' quarrel with him, though he'd always known it was in her somewhere. It was magnificent. It was washing over him in a musical torrent of absolute nonsense. It was operatic, and he found it quite beautiful. Like sitting through a rainstorm without getting wet: trees straining, leaves flying, dark, windy, torrential. Majestic.

Her idea of coffee was basically wet grounds, so it brought him around in short order. "You're right, I'm wrong, and I'm sorry," he admitted tangentially, knowing she didn't understand a word, "so come on and help me," and he opened the sink cabinet, where he had hidden all his bottles when he'd noticed the earlier disapproving glances. He then decanted them down the drain: vodka, Southern Comfort, the gin, the party jug of tequila, even the last two inches of his favorite single-malt. Moslems didn't drink, and really, how wrong could any billion people be? He gulped a couple of aspirin and picked up the phone.

"The police were here. They know about us. I got upset. I drank too much."

"Did they beat you?"

"Uh, no. They're not big fans of beating over here, they've got better methods. They'll be back. We are in big trouble."

She folded her arms. "Then we'll run away."

"You know, we have a proverb for that in America. 'You can run, but you can't hide.'"

"Darling, I love your poetry, but when the police come to the house, it's serious."

"Yes. It's very serious, it's serious as cancer. You've got no I.D. You have no passport. You can't get on any plane to get away. Even the trains and lousy bus stations have facial recognition. My car is useless too. They'd read my license plate a hundred times before we hit city limits. I can't rent another car without leaving credit records. The cops have got my number."

"We'll steal a fast car and go very fast."

"You can't outrun them! That is not possible! They've all got phones like we do, so they're always ahead of us, waiting."

"I'm a rebel! I'll never surrender!" She lifted her chin. "Let's get married."

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"I'd love to, but we can't. We have no license. We have no blood test."

"Then we'll marry in some place where they have all the blood they want. Beirut, that would be good." She placed her free hand against her chest. "We were married in my heart, the first time we ever made love."

This artless confession blew through him like a summer breeze. "They do have rings for cash at a pawnbroker's.... But I'm a Catholic. There must be *somebody* who does this sort of thing.... Maybe some heretic mullah. Maybe a Santeria guy?"

"If we're husband and wife, what can they do to us? We haven't done anything wrong! I'll get a Green Card. I'll beg them! I'll beg for mercy. I'll beg political asylum."

Agent Portillo conspicuously cleared his throat. "Mr. Hernandez, please! This would not be the conversation you two need to be having."

"I forgot to mention the worst part," Felix said. "They know about our phones."

"Miss Kadivar, can you also understand me?"

"Who are you? I hate you. Get off this line and let me talk to him."

"Salaam alekom to you, too," Portillo concluded. "It's a sad commentary on federal procurement when a mullah's daughter has a fancy translator, and I can't even talk live with my own fellow agents. By the way, those two gentlemen from the new regime in Teheran are staking out your apartment. How they failed to recognize your girlfriend on her way in, that I'll never know. But if you two listen to me, I think I can walk you out of this very dangerous situation."

"I don't want to leave my beloved," she said.

"Over my dead body," Felix declared. "Come and get me. Bring a gun."

"Okay, Miss Kadivar, you would seem to be the more rational of the two parties, so let me talk sense to you. You have no future with this man. What kind of wicked man seduces a decent girl with phone pranks? He's an *aayash*, he's a playboy. America has a fifty percent divorce rate. He would never ask your father honorably for your hand. What would your mother say?"

"Who is this awful man?" she said, shaken. "He knows everything!"

"He's a snake!" Felix said. "He's the devil!"

"You still don't get it, compadre. I'm not the Great Satan. Really, I'm

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not! I am the *good guy*. I'm your guardian angel, dude. I am trying really hard to give you back a normal life."

"Okay cop, you had your say, now listen to me. I love her body and soul, and even if you kill me dead for that, the flames in my heart will set my coffin on fire."

She burst into tears. "Oh God, my God, that's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me."

"You kids are sick, okay?" Portillo snapped. "This would be *mental illness* that I'm eavesdropping on here! You two don't even *speak each other's language*. You had every fair warning! Just remember, when it happens, you *made me* do it. Now try this one on for size, Romeo and Juliet." The phones went dead.

Felix placed his dead phone on the tabletop. "Okay. Situation report. We've got no phones, no passports, no ID and two different intelligence agencies are after us. We can't fly, we can't drive, we can't take a train or a bus. My credit cards are useless now, my bank cards will just track me down, and I guess I've lost my job now. I can't even walk out my own front door.... And wow, you don't understand a single word I'm saying. I can tell from that look in your eye. You are completely thrilled."

She put her finger to her lips. Then she took him by the hand.

Apparently, she had a new plan. It involved walking. She wanted to walk to Los Angeles. She knew the words "Los Angeles," and maybe there was somebody there that she knew. This trek would involve crossing half the American continent on foot, but Felix was at peace with that ambition. He really thought he could do it. A lot of people had done it just for the sake of gold nuggets, back in 1849. Women had walked to California just to meet a guy with gold nuggets.

The beautiful part of this scheme was that, after creeping out the window, they really had vanished. The feds might be all over the airports, over everything that mattered, but they didn't care about what didn't matter. Nobody was looking out for dangerous interstate pedestrians.

To pass the time as they walked, she taught him elementary Farsi. The day's first lesson was body parts, because that was all they had handy for pointing. That suited Felix just fine. If anything, this expanded their passionate communion. He was perfectly willing to starve for that, fight

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for that and die for that. Every form of intercourse between man and woman was fraught with illusion, and the bigger, the better. Every hour that passed was an hour they had not been parted.

They had to sleep rough. Their clothes became filthy. Then, on the tenth day, they got arrested.

She was, of course, an illegal alien, and he had the good sense to talk only Spanish, so of course, he became one as well. The Immigration cops piled them into the bus for the border, but they got two seats together and were able to kiss and hold hands. The other deported wretches even smiled at them.

He realized now that he was sacrificing everything for her: his identity, his citizenship, flag, church, habits, money.... Everything, and good riddance. He bit thoughtfully into his wax-papered cheese sandwich. This was the federal bounty distributed to every refugee on the bus, along with an apple, a small carton of homogenized milk, and some carrot chips.

When the protein hit his famished stomach Felix realized that he had gone delirious with joy. He was *growing* by this experience. It had broken every stifling limit within him. His dusty, savage, squalid world was widening drastically.

Giving alms, for instance — before his abject poverty, he'd never understood that alms were holy. Alms were indeed very holy. From now on — as soon as he found a place to sleep, some place that was so wrecked, so torn, so bleeding, that it never asked uncomfortable questions about a plumber — as soon as he became a plumber again, then he'd be giving some alms.

She ate her food, licked her fingers, then fell asleep against him, in the moving bus. He brushed the free hair from her dirty face. She was twenty days older now. "This is a pearl," he said aloud. "This is a pearl by far too rare to be contained within the shell of time and space."

Why had those lines come to him, in such a rush? Had he read them somewhere? Or were those lines his own?

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There's an editor of YA fiction who test-markets her books with fourteen-year-olds. She says that the books the kids love are not the ones that parents and librarians recommend. The latter tend to be more wholesome vegetables while the former are usually burgers and fries. Sometimes it seems like schoolteachers spoil the work of certain writers for most students by forcing the books on them too soon—how many teens are ready to appreciate Thomas Wolfe! Or Henry James!

...Which brings us to the story of Mr. Gaunt, a tale that we hope will spark some interest in Master James among those readers whose junior years were marred by having to write an essay on innocence and experience in "The Turn of the Screw."

John Langan's first story in our pages was "On Skua Island" in our August 2001 issue, a creepy trip to the northern isles of the United Kingdom. The story ended up on the final ballot for the International Horror Guild award. Mr. Langan lives in upstate New York where he is at work on a Ph.D. He notes also that he has recently written an article on Thomas Ligotti for the forthcoming Ligotti Reader.

Mr. Gaunt

By John Langan

I

IT WAS NOT UNTIL FIVE weeks after his father's funeral that Henry Farange was able to remove the white plastic milk crate containing the old man's final effects from the garage. His reticence was a surprise: his father had been sick — dying, really — for the better part of two years and Henry had known it, had known of the enlarged heart, the failing kidneys, the brain jolted by mini-strokes. He had known it was, in the nursing home doctor's favorite cliché, only a matter of time, and if there were moments Henry could not believe the old man had held on for as long or as well as he had, that didn't mean he expected his father to walk out of the institution to which his steadily declining health had consigned him. For all that, the inevitable phone call, the one telling him that his father had suffered what appeared to be a heart attack, caught him off-guard, and when his father's nurse had approached him at the gravesite, her short arms cradling the milk crate into which the few items the old

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man had taken with him to the nursing home had been deposited, Henry's chest had tightened, his eyes filled with burning tears. Upon his return home from the post-funeral brunch, he had removed the crate from his back seat and carried it into the garage, where he set it atop his workbench, telling himself he couldn't face what it contained today, but would see to it tomorrow.

Tomorrow, though, turned into the day after tomorrow, which became the day after that, and then the following day, and so on, until a two-week period passed during which Henry didn't think of the white plastic milk crate at all, and was only reminded of it when a broken cabinet hinge necessitated his sliding up the garage door. The sight of the milk crate was a reproach, and in a sudden burst of repentance he rushed up to it, hauled it off the workbench, and ran into the house with it as if it were a pot of boiling water and he without gloves. He half-dropped it onto the kitchen table and stood over it, panting. Now that he let his gaze wander over the crate's contents, he could see that it was not as full as he had feared. A dozen hardcover books: his father's favorite Henry James novels, which, he had claimed, were all that he wanted to read in his remaining time. Henry lifted them from the crate one by one, glancing at their titles. *The Ambassadors. The Wings of the Dove. The Golden Bowl. The Turn of the Screw. What Maisie Knew.* He recognized that last one: the old man had tried twice to convince him to read it, sending him a copy when he was at college, and again a couple of years ago, a month or two before the old man entered the nursing home. It was his father's favorite book of his favorite writer, and, although he was no English scholar, Henry had done his best, both times, to read it. But he rapidly became lost in the labyrinth of the book's prose, in sentences that wound on for what felt like days, so that by the time you arrived at the end, you had forgotten the beginning and had to start over again. He hadn't finished *What Maisie Knew*, had given up the attempt after Chapter One the first time, Chapter Three the second, and had had to admit his failures to his father. He had blamed his failures on other obligations, on school and work, promising he would give the book another try when he was less busy. He might make good his promise yet: there might be a third attempt, possibly even success, but when he was done, his father would not be waiting to discuss it with him. Henry removed the rest of the books from the crate rapidly.

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Here was a framed photo of Henry receiving his MBA, a smaller black and white picture of a man and woman he recognized as his grandparents tucked into its lower right corner. Here was a gray cardboard shoebox filled with assorted snapshots that appeared to stretch back over his father's lifetime, as well as four old letters folded in their original envelopes. Here was a postcard showing the view up the High Street to Edinburgh Castle. Here was the undersized saltire, the blue and white flag of Scotland, he had bought for his father when he had stopped off for a weekend in Edinburgh on his way home from Frankfurt, just last summer. Here was a cassette tape wrapped in a piece of ruled notebook paper bound to it by a thick rubber band, his name written on the paper in his father's rolling hand.

His heart leapt, and Henry slid the rubber band from around the paper with fingers suddenly dumb. There was more writing on the other side of the paper, a brief note. He read, "Dear Son, I'm making this tape *just in case.* Listen to it *as soon as possible.* It's all true. Love, Dad." That was all. He turned the tape over: it was plain and black, no label on either side. Leaving the note on the table, he carried the tape into the living room, to the stereo. He slid the tape into the deck, pushed PLAY, adjusted the volume, and stood back, arms crossed.

For a moment, there was only the hum of blank tape, then a loud snap and clatter and the sound of his father's voice, low, resonant, and slightly graveled, the way it sounded when he was tired. His father said, "I think I have this thing working. Yes, that's it." He cleared his throat. "Hello, Henry, it's your father. If you're listening to this, then I'm gone. I realize this may seem strange, but there are facts of which you need to be aware, and I'm concerned I don't have much time to tell you them. I've tried to write it all down for you, but my hand's shaking so badly I can't make any progress. To tell the truth, I don't know if the matter's sufficiently clear in my head for me to write it. So, I've borrowed this machine from the night-duty nurse. I suppose I should have told you all this — oh, years ago, but I didn't, because — well, let's get to what I have to say first. I can fill in my motivations along the way. I hope you have the time to listen to this all at once, because I don't think it'll make much sense in bits and pieces. I'm not sure it makes much sense all together.

"The other night, I saw your uncle on television: not David, your

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mother's brother, but George, my brother. I'm sure you won't remember him: the last and only time you saw him, you were four. I saw him, and I saw his butler. You know how little I sleep these days, no matter, it seems, how tired I am. Much of the time between sunset and sunrise I pass reading — re-reading James, and watching more television than I should. Last night, unable to concentrate on *What Maisie Knew* any longer, I found myself watching a documentary about Edinburgh on public television. If I watch PBS, I can convince myself I'm being mildly virtuous, and I was eager to see one of my favorite cities, if only on the screen. It's the city my parents came from; I know you know that. Sadly, the documentary was a failure, so spectacularly insipid that it almost succeeded in delivering me to sleep a good three hours ahead of schedule. Then I saw George walk across the screen. The shot was of Prince's Street during the Edinburgh festival. The street was crowded, but I recognized my brother. He was slightly stooped, his hair and beard bone-white, though his step was still lively. He was followed by his butler, who stood as tall and unbending as ever. Just as he was about to walk off the screen, George stopped, turned his head to the camera, and winked, slowly and deliberately.

"From the edge of sleep, I was wide awake, filled with such fear my shaking hands fumbled the remote control onto the floor. I couldn't muster the courage to retrieve it, and it lay there until the morning nurse picked it up. I didn't sleep: I couldn't. Your uncle kept walking across that screen, his butler close behind. Though I hadn't heard the news of his death, I had assumed he must be gone by now. More than assumed: I had hoped it. I should have guessed, however, that George would not have slipped so gently into that good night; indeed, although he's just this side of ninety, I now suspect he'll be around for quite some time to come.

"Seeing him — does it sound too mad to say that I half-think he saw me? More than half-think: I know he saw me. Seeing my not-dead older brother walk across the screen, to say nothing of his butler, I became obsessed with the thought of you. Your uncle may try to contact you, especially once I'm gone, which I have the most unreasonable premonition may be sooner rather than later. Before he does, you must know about him. You must know who, and what, he is. You must know his history, and you must know about his butler, about that...monster. For reasons

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you'll understand later, I can't simply tell you what I have to tell you, or perhaps I should say I can't tell you what I have to tell you simply. If I were to come right out with it in two sentences, you wouldn't believe me; you'd think I had suffered one TIA too many. I can't warn you to stay away from your uncle and leave it at that: I know you, and I know the effect such prohibitions have on you; I've no desire to arouse your famous curiosity. So I'm going to ask you to bear with me, to let me tell you about my brother in what I think is the manner best suited to it. Indulge me, Henry, indulge your old father."

Henry paused the tape. He walked out of the living room back into the kitchen, where he rummaged the refrigerator for a beer while his father's words echoed in his ears. The old man knew him, all right: his "famous" curiosity was aroused, enough that he would sit down and listen to the rest of the tape now, in one sitting. His dinner date was not for another hour and a half, and, even if he were a few minutes late, that wouldn't be a problem. He smiled, thinking that despite his father's protestations of fear, once the old man warmed up to talking, you could hear the James scholar taking over, his words, his phrasing, his sentences, bearing subtle witness to a lifetime spent with the writer he had called "the Master." Henry pried the cap off the beer, checked to be sure the answering machine was on, switched the phone's ringer off, and returned to the living room, where he released the PAUSE button and settled himself on the couch.

His father's voice returned.

II

Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived with his father and his father's butler in a very large house. As the boy's father was frequently away, and often for long periods of time, he was left alone in the large house with the butler, whose name was Mr. Gaunt. While he was away, the boy's father allowed him to roam through every room in the house except one. He could run through the kitchen; he could bounce on his father's bed; he could leap from the tall chairs in the living room. But he must never, ever, under any circumstances, go into his father's study. His father was most insistent on this point. If the boy entered the study... his

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father refused to say what would happen, but the tone of his voice and the look on his face hinted that it would be something terrible.

That was how the story used to begin, as if it were a fairy tale that someone else had written and I just happened to remember. I suppose it sounds generic enough: the traditional, almost incantatory, beginning; the nondescript boy, father, butler, and house. Do you remember the first time I told it to you? I don't imagine so: you were five, although you were precocious, which was what necessitated the tale in the first place. You were staying with me for the summer — your mother and her second husband were in Greece — in the house in Highland. That house! All those rooms, the high ceilings, the porch with its view of the Hudson: how I wish you didn't have to sell it to afford the cost of putting me in this place. I had hoped you might choose to live there. Ah well, as you yourself said, what use is a house of that size to you, with no wife or family? Another regret....

But I was talking about the story, and the first time you heard it. Like some second-rate Bluebeard, I had permitted you free access to every room in the house save one: my study, which contained not the head of my previous wife (if only! Sorry, I know she's your mother), but extensive notes, four years' worth of notes toward the book I was about to write on Henry James's portrayal of family relations. Yes, yes, I should have known that declaring it forbidden would only pique your interest; it's one of those mistakes you not only can't believe you made, but that seems so fundamentally obvious you doubt whether in fact it occurred. The room was kept locked when I wasn't working in it, and I believed it secure. All this time later, I have yet to discover how you broke into it. I can see you sitting in the middle of the hardwood floor, four years' work scattered and shredded around you, a look of the most intense concentration upon your face as you dragged a pen across my first edition of *The Wings of the Dove*. I'm not sure how, but I remained calm, if not quite cheerful, as I escorted you from my study up the stairs to your bedroom. I sat you on the bed and told you I had a story for you. You were very excited: you loved it when I told you stories. Was it another one about Hercules? No, it wasn't; it was another kind of story. It was the story of a little boy just about your age, a little boy who had opened a door he was not supposed to.

Then and there, my brain racing, I told you the story of Mr. Gaunt and his terrible secret, speaking slowly, deliberately, so that I would have time

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to shape the next event. Does it surprise you to hear that the story has no written antecedent? It became such a part of our lives after that. It frightened you out of my study for the rest of that summer; you avoided that entire side of the house. Then the next summer, when your friend Brad came to stay for the weekend and the three of us stayed up late while I told you stories, you actually requested it. "Tell about Mr. Gaunt," you said. I can't tell you how shocked I was. I was shocked that you remembered: children forget much, and it's difficult to predict what will lodge in their minds; plus you had been with your mother and husband number two without interruption for almost nine months. I was shocked, too, that you would want to hear a narrative expressly crafted to frighten you. It frightened poor Brad; we had to leave the light on for him, which you treated with a bit more contempt than really was fair.

After that: how many times did I tell you that story? Several that same summer, and several every summer for the next six or seven years. Even when you were a teenager, and grew your hair long and refused to remove that denim jacket that you wore down to an indistinct shade of pale, even then you requested the story, albeit with less frequency. It's never gone that far from us, has it? At dinner, the visit before last, we talked about it. Strange that in all this time you never asked me how I came by it, in what volume I first read it. Perhaps you're used to my having an esoteric source for everything and assume this to be the case here. Or perhaps you don't want to know: you find it adds to the story not to know its origin. Or perhaps you're just not interested: literary scholarship never has been your strong point. That's not a reproach: investment banking has been very good for and to you, and you know how proud I am of you.

There is more to the story, though: there is more to every story. You can always work your way down, peel back the layers till you discover, as it were, the skull beneath the skin. Whatever you thought about the story's roots, whatever you would answer if I were to ask you where you thought I had plucked it from, I'm sure you never guessed that it grew out of an event that occurred in our family. That *donnée*, as James would've called it, involved George, George and his butler and Peter, George's son and your cousin. Yes, you haven't heard of Peter before: I haven't ever mentioned his name to you. He's been dead a long time now.

You met George when you were four, at the house in Highland. I had

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just moved into it from the apartment in Huguenot I occupied after your mother and I separated. George was in Manhattan for a couple of days, doing research at one of the museums, and took the train up to spend the afternoon with us. He was short, stocky verging on portly, and he kept his beard trimmed in a Vandyke, which combined with his deep-set eyes and sharp nose leant him rather a Satanic appearance: the effect, I'm sure, intended. He wore a vest and a pocket watch with which you were fascinated, not having seen a pocket watch before. Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, you kept asking George what time it was. He responded to each question by slowly withdrawing the watch from his pocket by its chain, popping open its cover, carefully scrutinizing its face, and announcing, "Why, Hank," (he insisted on calling you Hank; he appeared to find it most amusing), "it's three o'clock." He was patient with you; I will grant him that.

After I put you to bed, he and I sat on the back porch looking at the Hudson, drinking Scotch, and talking, the end result of which was that he made a confession — confession! it was more of a boast! — and I demanded he leave the house, leave it then and there and never return, never speak to me or communicate in any way with me again. He didn't believe I was serious, but he went. I've no idea how or if he made his train. I haven't heard from him since, all these years, nor have I have heard of him, until last night.

But this is all out of order. You don't know anything about your uncle. I've been careful not to mention his name lest I arouse that curiosity of yours. Indeed, maybe I shouldn't be doing so now. That's assuming, of course, that you'll take any of the story I'm going to relate seriously, that you won't think I've confused my Henry James with M.R. James, or, worse, think it a sign of mental or emotional decay, the first hint of senility or depression. The more I insist on the truth of what I tell, the more shrill and empty my voice will sound; I know the scenario well. I risk, then, a story that might be taken as little more than a prolonged symptom of mental impairment or illness; though really, how interesting is that? In any event, it's not as if I have to worry about you putting me in a home. Yes, I know you had no choice. Let's start with the background, the condensed information the author delivers, after an interesting opening, in one or two well-written chapters.

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George was ten years older than I, the child of what in those days was considered our parents' middle age, as I was the child of their old age. This is to say that Mother was thirty-five when George was born, and forty-five when I was. Father was close to fifty at my birth, about the same age I was when you were born. Funny — as a boy and a young man, I used to swear that, if I were to have children, I would not wait until I was old enough to be their grandfather, and despite those vows that was exactly what I did. Do you suppose that's why you haven't married yet? We like to think we're masters of our own fates, but the fact is, our parents' examples exert far more influence on us than we realize or are prepared to realize. I like to think I was a much more youthful father to you than my father was to me, but in all fairness, fifty was a different age for me than it was for him. For me, fifty was the age of my maturity, a time of ripeness, a balance point between youth and old age; for Father, fifty was a room with an unsettlingly clear view of the grave. He died when I was fifteen, you know, while here I am, thanks to a daily assortment of colored pills closer to eighty than anyone in my family before me, with the exception, of course, of my brother.

I have few childhood memories of George: an unusually intelligent student, he left the house and the country for Oxford at the age of fifteen. Particularly gifted in foreign languages, he achieved minor fame for his translation and commentary on *Les mystères du ver*, a fifteenth-century French translation of a much older Latin work. England suited him well; he returned to see us in Poughkeepsie infrequently. He did, however, visit our parents' brothers and sisters, our uncles and aunts, in and around Edinburgh on holidays, which appeared to mollify Father and Mother. (Their trips back to Scotland were fewer than George's trips back to them.) My brother also voyaged to the Continent: France, first, which irritated Father (he was possessed by an almost pathological hatred of all things French, whose cause I never could discover, since our name is French; you can be sure, he would not have read my book on Flaubert); then Italy, which worried Mother (she was afraid the Catholics would have him); then beyond, on to those countries that for the greater part of my life were known as Yugoslavia: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and past them to the nations bordering the Black Sea. He made this trip and others like it, to Finland, to Turkey, to Persia as it was then called, often enough. I

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have no idea how he afforded any of it. Our parents sent him little enough money, and his scholarship was no source of wealth. I have no idea, either, of the purpose of these trips; when I asked him, George answered, "Research," and said no more. He wrote once a month, never more and occasionally less, short letters in which a single nugget of information was buried beneath layers of formality and pleasantry; not like those letters I wrote to you while you were at Harvard. It was in such a letter that he told us he was engaged to be married.

Aside from the fact that it lasted barely two years, the most remarkable thing about your uncle's marriage was your cousin, Peter, who was born seven months after it. Mother's face wore a suspicious frown for several days after the news of his birth reached us (I think it came by telegram; your grandparents were very late installing a phone); Father was too excited by the birth of his first grandson to care. I didn't feel much except a kind of disinterested curiosity. I was an uncle, but I was thirteen, so the role didn't have the significance for me it might have had I been only a few years older. The chances of my seeing my nephew any time in the near future were sufficiently slim to justify my reserve; as it happened, however, my brother and his wife, whose name was Clarissa, visited us the following summer with Peter. Clarissa was quite wealthy; she was also, I believe, quite a bit older than George, though by how much I couldn't say. Even now, after a lifetime's practice, I'm not much good at deciphering people's ages, which causes me no end of trouble, I can assure you. Their visit went smoothly enough, though your grandparents showed, I noticed, the razor edge of uneasiness with their new daughter-in-law's crisp accent and equally crisp manners. Your grandmother used her wedding china every night, while your grandfather, whose speech usually was peppered with Scots words and expressions, spoke what my mother used to call "the King's English." Their working class origins, I suspect, rising up to haunt them.

Peter was fat and blond, a pleasant child who appeared to enjoy his place on your grandmother's hip, which from the moment he arrived was where he spent most of his days. Any reservations Mother might have had concerning the circumstances of his birth were wiped away at the sight of him. When he returned from work, Father had a privileged place for his grandson on his knee: holding each of the baby's hands in his hands, Father

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sat Peter upright on his knee, then jiggled his leg up and down, bouncing Peter as if he were riding a horse, all the while singing a string of nonsense syllables: "a leedle lidel leedle lidel leedle lidel lum." It was something Father did with any baby who entered the house; he must have done it with me, and with George. I tried it with you, but you were less than amused by it. After what appeared to be some initial doubt at his grandfather's behavior, when he rode up and down with an almost tragic expression on his face, Peter quickly came to enjoy and even anticipate it, and when he saw his grandfather walk in the door, the baby's face would break into an enormous grin, and he waved his arms furiously. Clarissa was good with her son, handling him with more confidence than you might expect from a new mother; George largely ignored Peter, passing him to Clarissa, Mother, Father, or me whenever he could manage it. Much of his days George spent sequestered in his room, working, he said, on a new translation. Of what he did not specify, only that the book was very old, much older than *Les mystères du ver*. He kept the door to the room locked, which I discovered, of course, trying to open it.

The three of them stayed a month, leaving with promises to write on both sides, and although it was more than a year later, it seemed the next thing anyone heard or knew Clarissa had filed for divorce. Your grandparents were stunned. They refused to tell me the grounds for Clarissa's action, but when I lay awake at night I heard them discussing it downstairs in the living room, their voices faint and indistinguishable except when one or the other of them became agitated and shouted, "It isn't true, for God's sake, it can't be true! We didn't raise him like that!" Clarissa sued for custody of Peter, and somewhat to our parents' surprise, I think, George countersued. It was not only that he did not appear possessed of sufficient funds; he did not appear possessed of sufficient interest. The litigation was interminable and bitter. Your grandfather died before it was through, struck dead in the street as we were walking back from Sunday services by a stroke whose cause, I was and am sure, was his elder son's divorce. George did not return for the funeral; he phoned to say it was absolutely impossible for him to attend — the case and all — he was sure Father would have understood. The divorce and custody battle were not settled for another year after that. When they were, George was triumphant.

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I don't know if you remember the opening lines of *What Maisie Knew*. The book begins with a particularly messy divorce and custody fight, in which the father, though "bespattered from head to foot," initially succeeds. The reason, James tells us, is "not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots." I can recall reading those lines for the first time: I was a senior in high school, and a jolt of recognition shot up my spine as I recognized George and Clarissa, whose final blows against one another had been struck the previous fall. I think that's when I first had an inclination I might study old James. Unlike James's novel, in which the custody of Maisie is eventually divided between her parents, George won full possession of Peter, which he refused to share in the slightest way with Clarissa. I imagine she must have been devastated. George packed his and Peter's bags and moved north, to Edinburgh, where he purchased a large house on the High Street and engaged the services of a manservant, Mr. Gaunt.

Oh yes, Mr. Gaunt was an actual person. Are you surprised to hear that? I suppose he did seem rather a fantastic creation, didn't he? I can't think of him with anything less than complete revulsion, revulsion and fear, more fear than I wish I felt. I met him when I was in Edinburgh doing research on Stevenson and called on my brother, who had returned from the Shetlands that morning and was preparing to leave for Belgium later that same night. The butler was exactly as I described him to you in the story, only more so.

Mr. Gaunt never said a word. He was very tall, and very thin, and his skin was very white and very tight, as if he were wearing a suit that was too small. He had a long face and long, lank, thin, colorless hair, and a big, thick jaw, and tiny eyes that peered out at you from the deep caverns under his brows. He did not smile, but kept his mouth in a perpetual pucker. He wore a black coat with tails, a gray vest and gray pants, and a white shirt with a gray cravat. He was most quiet, and if you were standing in the kitchen or the living room and did not hear anything behind you, you could expect to turn around and find Mr. Gaunt standing there.

Mr. Gaunt served the meals, though he himself never ate that the boy

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saw, and escorted visitors to and from the boy's father when the boy's father was home, and, on nights when he was not home, Mr. Gaunt unlocked the door of the forbidden study at precisely nine o'clock and went into it, closing the door behind him. He remained there for an hour. The boy did not know what the butler did in that room, nor was he all that interested in finding out, but he was desperate for a look at his father's study.

Your uncle claimed to have contracted Gaunt's service during one of his many trips, and explained that the reason Gaunt never spoke was a thick accent — I believe George said it was Belgian — that marred his speech and caused him excruciating embarrassment. As Gaunt served us tea and shortbread, I remember thinking that something about him suggested greed, deep and profound: his hands, whose movements were precise yet eager; his eyes, which remained fixed on the food, and us; his back, which was slightly bent, inclining him toward us but having the opposite effect, making him seem as if he were straining upright, resisting a powerful downward pull. No doubt it was the combination of these things. Whatever the source, I was noticeably glad to see him exit the room; although, after he had left, I had the distinct impression he was listening at the door, hunched down, still greedy.

As you must have guessed, the boy in our fairy tale was Peter, your cousin. He was fourteen when he had his run-in with Mr. Gaunt, older, perhaps, than you had imagined him; the children in fairy tales are always young children, aren't they? I should also say more about the large house in which he lived. It was a seventeenth-century mansion located on the High Street in Edinburgh, across the street and a few doors down from St. Giles's Cathedral. Its inhabitants had included John Jackson, a rather notorious character from the early nineteenth century. There's a mention of him in James's notebooks: he heard Jackson's story while out to dinner in Poughkeepsie, believe it or not, and considered treating it in a story before rejecting it as, "too lurid, too absolutely over the top." The popular legend, of whose origins I'm unsure, is that Jackson, a defrocked Anglican priest, had truck with infernal powers. Robed and hooded men were seen exiting his house who had not been seen entering it. Lights glowed in windows, strange cries and laughter sounded, late at night. A woman who claimed to have worked as Jackson's chambermaid swore there was a door

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to Hell in a room deep under the basement. He was suspected in the vanishings of several local children, but nothing was proved against him. He died mysteriously, found, as I recall, at the foot of a flight of stairs, apparently having tumbled down them. His ghost, its neck still broken, was sighted walking in front of the house, looking over at St. Giles and grinning; about what, I've never heard.

Most of this information about the house I had from George during my visit; it was one of the few subjects about which I ever saw him enthused. I don't know how much if any of it your cousin knew; though I suspect his father would have told him all. Despite the picture its history conjures, the house was actually quite pleasant: five stories high including the attic, full of surprisingly large and well-lit rooms, decorated with a taste I wouldn't have believed George possessed. There was indeed a locked study: it comprised the entirety of the attic. I saw the great dark oaken door to it when your uncle took me on a tour of the house: we walked up the flight of stairs to the attic landing and there was the entrance to the study. George did not open it. I asked him if this was where he kept the bodies, and although he cheerfully replied that no, no, that was what the cellar was for, his eyes registered a momentary flash of something that was panic or annoyance. I did not ask him to open the door, in which there was a keyhole of sufficient diameter to afford a good look into the room beyond. Had my visit been longer, had I been his guest overnight, I might have stolen back up to that landing to peak at whatever it was my brother did not wish me to see. Curiosity, it would appear, does not just run in our family: it gallops.

Peter lived in this place, his father's locked secret above him, his only visitors his tutors, his only companion the silent butler. That's a bit much, isn't it? During our final conversation, George told me that Peter had been a friendless boy, but I doubt he knew his son well enough to render such a verdict with either accuracy or authority. Peter didn't know many, if any, other children, but I like to think of your cousin having friends in the various little shops that line the High Street. You know where I'm talking about, the cobbled street that runs in a straight line up to the Castle. You remember those little shops with their flimsy T-shirts, their campy postcards, their overpriced souvenirs. We bought the replica of the Castle that used to sit on the mantelpiece at one of them, along with a rather

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expensive pin for that girl you were involved with at the time. (What was her name? Jane?) I like to think of Peter, out for a walk, stopping in several shops along the way, chatting with the old men and women behind the counter when business was slow. He was a fine conversationalist for his age, your cousin.

I had met him again, you see, when he was thirteen, the year before the events I'm relating occurred. George was going to be away for the entire summer, so Peter came on his own to stay with your grandmother. I was living in Manhattan — actually, I was living in a cheap apartment across the river in New Jersey and taking the ferry to Manhattan each morning. My days I split teaching and writing my dissertation, which was on the then relatively fresh topic of James's later novels, particularly *The Golden Bowl*, and their modes of narration. Every other week, more often when I could manage it, I took the train up to your grandmother's to spend the day and have dinner with her. This was not as great a kindness as I would like it to seem: my social life was nonexistent, and I was desperately lonely. Thus, I visited Peter several times throughout June, July, and August.

At our first meeting he was unsure what to make of me, spending most of the meal silently staring down at his plate, and asking to be excused as soon as he had finished his dessert. Over subsequent visits, however, our relationship progressed. By our last dinner he was speaking with me freely, shaking my hand vigorously when it was time for me to leave for my bus and telling me that he had greatly enjoyed making my acquaintance. What did he look like? Funny: I don't think I have a picture of him; not from that visit, anyway. He wasn't especially tall; if he was due an adolescent growth-spurt, it had yet to arrive. His hair, while not the same gold color it had been when he was a baby, still was blond, slightly curled, and his eyes were dark brown. His face, well, as is true with all children, his face blended both his parents', although in his case the blend was particularly fine. What I mean is, unlike you, whose eyes and forehead have always been identifiably mine and whose nose and chin have always been identifiably your mother's, Peter's face, depending on the angle and lighting, appeared to be either all his father or all his mother. Even looking at him directly, you could see both faces simultaneously. He spoke with an Edinburgh accent, crisp and clear, and when he was excited

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or enthusiastic about a subject, his words would stretch out: "That's maaaarvelous." He told your grandmother her accent hadn't slipped in the least, and she smiled for the rest of the day.

He was extremely bright, and extremely interested in ancient Egypt, about which his father had provided him with several surprisingly good books. He could not decide whether to be a philologist, like his father, or an Egyptologist, which sounded more interesting; he inclined to Egyptology, but thought his father would appreciate him following his path. Surprising and heartbreaking—horrifying—as it seems in retrospect, Peter loved and missed his father. He was very proud of George: he knew of and appreciated George's translations, and confided in us his hope that one day he might achieve something comparable. "My father's a genius," I can hear him saying, almost defiantly. We were sitting at your grandmother's dining room table. I can't remember how we had arrived at the subject of George, but he went on, "Aye, a genius. None of his teachers were ever as smart as him. None of them could make head nor tail of *Les mystères du ver*, and my father translated the whole thing, on his own. There was this one teacher who thought he was something, and he was pretty smart, but my father was smarter; he showed him."

"Of course he's smart, dear," your grandmother said. "He's a Farange. Just like you and your uncle."

"And your Granny," I said.

"Oh, go on, you," she said.

"He's translated things that no one's even heard of," Peter insisted. "He's translated pre-dynastic Egyptian writing. That's from before the pyramids, even. That's fifty-five centuries ago. Most folk don't even know it exists."

"Has he let you see any of it?" I asked.

"No," Peter said glumly. "He says I'm not ready yet. I have to master Latin and Greek before I can move on to just hieroglyphics."

"I'm sure you will," your grandmother said, and we moved on to some other topic. Later, after Peter was asleep, she said to me, "He's a lovely boy, our Peter, a lovely boy. So polite and well-mannered. But he seems awfully lonely to me. Always with his nose in a book: I don't think his father spends nearly enough time with him."

Peter did not speak of his mother.

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He knew ancient Egypt as if he had lived in it: your grandmother and I spent more than one dinner listening to your cousin narrate such events as the building of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the factual accuracy of which I couldn't verify but whose telling kept me enthralled. Peter was a born *raconteur:* as he narrated his history, he would assume the voices of the different figures in it, from Pharaoh to slave. "The Great Pyramid," he would say, addressing the two of us as if we were a crowd at a lecture hall, "was built for the Pharaoh Khufu. The Greeks called him Cheops. He lived during the Fourth Dynasty, which was about four and half thousand years ago. The moment he became Pharaoh, Khufu started planning his pyramid, because, really, it was the most important thing he was ever going to build. The Egyptians were terribly concerned with death, and spent much of their lives preparing for it. He picked a site on the western bank of the Nile. The Egyptians thought the western bank was a special place because the sun set in the west. The west was the place of the dead, if you like, the right place to build your tomb. That's all it was, after all, a pyramid. Not that you'd know that from the name: it's a Greek word, 'pyramid'; it comes from 'wheat cake.' The Greeks thought the pyramids looked like giant pointy wheat cakes. We get a lot of names for Egyptian things from the Greeks: like 'pharaoh,' which they adapted from an Egyptian word that meant 'great house.' And 'sarcophagus,' that comes from the Greek for 'flesh-eating.' Why they called funeral vaults flesh-eaters I'll never know." And so on. He did love a good digression, your cousin: he would have made a fine college professor.

So you see, all this is why I dispute your uncle's claim that he was friendless, solitary: given the right set of circumstances, Peter could be positively garrulous. I have little trouble picturing him keeping the proprietor of a small bookshop, say, entertained with the story of the Pharaoh — I can't remember his name — who angered his people so that after his death his statues and monuments were destroyed and he was not buried in his own tomb; no one knew what had become of his body. No one knew what happened to his son either. I planned to take Peter to the Met, to see their Egyptian collection, but for reasons I can't recall we never went. At our final visit, he suggested we write. Initially, I demurred: I was buried in the last chapter of my dissertation, which I had expected to be forty pages I could write in a month but which rapidly had swelled to

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eighty-five pages that would consume my every waking moment for the next four months. We could write when I was finished, I explained. Peter pleaded with me, though, and in the end I agreed. We didn't write much, just four letters from him and three replies from me.

I found myself leafing through Peter's letters the winter after his visit, when your uncle telephoned your grandmother to inform her that your cousin was missing: he had run away from home and no one knew where he was. Your grandmother was distraught; I was, too, when she called me with the news of Peter's vanishing. She was upset at George, who apparently had shown only the faintest trace of emotion while delivering to her what she rightly regarded as terrible information. He was sure Peter would turn up, George said, boys will be boys and all that, what can you do? Lack of proper family feeling in anyone bothered your grandmother; it was her pet peeve; and she found it a particularly egregious fault in one of her own, raised to know better. "It's a good thing your father isn't alive to see this," she said to me, and I was unsure whether she referred to Peter's running away or George's understated reaction to it.

At the time, I suspected Peter might be making his way to his mother's, and went so far as to contact Clarissa myself, but if such was her son's plan she knew nothing about it. Through her manners I could hear the distress straining her voice, and another thing, a reserve I initially could not understand. Granted that speaking to your former brother-in-law is bound to be awkward, Clarissa's reticence was still in excess of any such awkwardness. Gradually, as we stumbled our way through a conversation composed of half-starts and long pauses, I understood that she was possessed by a mixture of fear and loathing: fear, because she suspected me of acting in concert with my brother to trick and trap her (though what more she had left to lose at that point I didn't and don't know; her pride, I suppose); loathing, because she thought that I was cut from the same cloth as George. Whatever George had done to prompt her to seek divorce a dozen years before, her memory and repugnance of it remained sufficiently fresh to make talking to me a considerable effort.

Peter didn't appear at his mother's, or any other relative's, nor did he return to his father's house. Against George's wishes, I'm sure, Clarissa involved the police almost immediately. Because of her social standing and the social standing of her family, I'm equally sure, they brought all

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their resources to bear on Peter's disappearance. The case achieved a notoriety that briefly extended across the Atlantic, scandalizing your grandmother; though I'm not aware that anyone ever connected George to us. Suspecting the worst, the police focused their attentions on George, bringing him in for repeated and intense questioning, investigating his trips abroad, ransacking his house. Strangely, in the midst of all this, Gaunt apparently went unnoticed. After subjecting George to close scrutiny for several weeks — which yielded no clue to where Peter might be or what might have happened to him — the detective in charge of the investigation fell dead of a heart attack while talking to your uncle on the telephone. As the man was no more than thirty, this was a surprise. His replacement was more kindly disposed to George, judging that he had undergone enough and concentrating the police's attentions elsewhere. Your cousin was not found; he was never found. Though your grandmother continued to hold out hope that he was alive until literally the day she died, thinking he might have found his way to Egypt, I didn't share her optimism, and reluctantly concluded that Peter had met his end.

I was correct, though I had no way of knowing how horrible that end had been. What happened to Peter took place while his father was out of the house; in Finland, he said. It was late winter, when Scotland has yet to free itself from its long nights and the sky is dark for much of the day. Peter had been living with his father's locked study for eleven years. So far as I know, he had shown no interest in the room in the past, which strikes me as a bit unusual, although I judge all other children's curiosity against yours, an unfair comparison. Perhaps George had told his own cautionary tale. There was no reason to expect Peter's interest to awaken at that moment, but it did. He became increasingly intrigued by that heavy door and what it concealed. I know this, you see, because it was in the first letter he sent to me, which arrived less than a month after his return home. He decided to confide in me, and I was flattered. Though he didn't write this to me, I believe he must have associated his father's study with those Egyptian tombs he'd been reading about; he must have convinced himself of a parallel between him entering that room and Howard Carter entering Tutankhamun's tomb. His father provided him a generous allowance, so I know he wasn't interested in money, as he himself was quick to reassure me in that same letter. He didn't want me to suspect his motives: he was

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after knowledge; he wanted to see what was hidden behind the dark door. Exactly how long that desire burned in him I can't say; he admitted that while he'd been wandering the woods behind your grandmother's house, he'd been envisioning himself walking through that room in his father's house, imagining its contents. He didn't specify what he thought those contents might be, and I wonder how accurate his imagination was. Did he picture the squat bookcases overstuffed with books, scrolls, and even stone tablets; the long tables heaped with goblets, boxes, candles, jars; the walls hung with paintings and drawings; the floor chalked with elaborate symbols? (I describe it well, don't I? I've seen it — but that must wait.)

It was with his second letter that Peter first disclosed his plans to satisfy his curiosity; plans I encouraged, if only mildly, when at last I sent him a reply. He would have to be careful, I wrote, if he were caught, I had no doubt the consequences would be severe. I didn't believe they actually would be, but I enjoyed participating in what I knew was, for your cousin, a great adventure. I suggested that he take things in stages, that he try a brief trip up the attic stairs first and see how that went. What length of time was required for him to amass sufficient daring to venture the narrow flight of stairs to the attic landing I can't say. Perhaps he climbed a few of the warped, creaking stairs one day, before his nerve broke and he bolted down them back to his room; then a few more the next day; another the day after that; and so on, adding a stair or two a day until at last he stood at the landing. Or perhaps he rushed up the staircase all at once, his heart pounding, his stomach weak, taking the stairs two and three at a time, at the great dark door almost before he knew it. Having reached the landing, was he satisfied with his accomplishment? Or were his eyes drawn to the door, to the wide keyhole that offered a view of the room beyond? We hadn't discussed that: did it seem too much, a kind of quantum leap from what he had risked scaling the stairs? Or did it seem the next logical step: in for a penny, in for a pound, as it were? Once he stood outside the door, he couldn't have waited very long to lower his eye to the keyhole. When he did, his mouth dry, his hands shaking slightly, expecting to hear either his father or Mr. Gaunt behind him at every moment, he was disappointed: the windows in the room were heavily curtained, the lights extinguished, leaving it dim to the point of darkness on even the brightest day, the objects inside no more than confused shadows.

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Peter boiled down all of this to two lines in his third letter, which I received inside a Christmas card. "I finally went to the door," he wrote, "and even looked in the keyhole! But everything was dark, and I couldn't see at all." Well, I suggested in my response, he would need to spy through the door when the study was occupied. Why not focus on Mr. Gaunt and his nine o'clock visitations? His father's returns home were too infrequent and erratic to be depended upon, and I judged the consequences of discovery by his father to be far in excess of those of discovery by the butler. (If I'd known....) Peter felt none of my unease around Mr. Gaunt, which was understandable, given that the butler had been a fixture in his home and life for more than a decade. In his fourth and final letter, Peter thanked me for my suggestion. He had been pondering a means to pilfer Gaunt's key to the room, only to decide that, for the moment, such an enterprise involved a degree of risk whatever was in the room might not be worth. I had the right idea: best to survey the attic clearly, then plan his next step. He would wait until his father was going to be away for a good couple of weeks, which wouldn't be until February. In the meantime, he was trying to decipher the sounds of Mr. Gaunt's nightly hour in the study: the two heavy clumps, the faint slithering, the staccato clicks like someone walking across the floor wearing tap shoes. I replied that it could be the butler was practicing his dancing, which I thought was much funnier at the time than I realize now it was, but that it seemed more likely what Peter was hearing was some sort of cleaning procedure. He should be careful, I wrote; obviously, the butler knew Peter wasn't supposed to be at the study, and if he caught him there, he might very well become quite upset, as George could hold him responsible for Peter's trespass.

I didn't hear from Peter again. For a time, I assumed this was because his enterprise had been discovered and he punished by his father. Then I thought it must be because he was burdened with too much schoolwork: the tutors his father had brought to the house for him, he had revealed in his second letter, were most demanding. I intended to write to him, to inquire after the status of our plan, but whenever I remembered my intention I was in the middle of something else that absolutely had to be finished and couldn't be interrupted, or so it seemed, and I never managed even to begin a letter. Then George called your grandmother, to tell her Peter was gone.

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It was more than a quarter century until I learned Peter's fate. Sitting there on the back porch of the house in Highland, I heard it all from my older brother who, in turn, had had it from Gaunt. Oh yes, from Mr. Gaunt: our story, you see, was never that far from the truth. Indeed, it was closer, much closer, than I wish it were.

George left Scotland for an extended trip to Finland the first week in February. He would be away, he told Peter, for at least two weeks, and possibly a third if the manuscripts he was going to view were as extensive as he hoped. Peter wore an appropriately glum face at his father's departure, which pleased George, who had no idea of his son's secret ambition. For the first week after his father left, Peter maintained his daily routine. When at last the appointed date for his adventure arrived, though, he spent it in a state of almost unbearable anticipation, barely able to maintain conversation with any of his shopkeeper friends, inattentive to his tutors, uninterested in his meals. This last would not have escaped Mr. Gaunt's notice.

After spending the late afternoon and early evening roaming through the first three floors of the house, leafing through the library, practicing his shots at the pool table, spinning the antique globe in the living room, Peter declared he was going to make an early night of it, which also would have caught the butler's attention. From first-hand experience, I can tell you that Peter was something of a night owl, retiring to bed only when your grandmother insisted and called him by his full name, and even then reading under the sheets with a flashlight. Gaunt may have suspected your cousin's intentions; I daresay he must have. This would explain why, an hour and a half after Peter said he was turning in, when his bedroom door softly creaked open and Peter, still fully dressed, crept out and slowly climbed the narrow staircase to the attic landing, he found the door to the study standing wide open. It could also be that the butler had grown careless, but that strikes me as unlikely. Whatever Mr. Gaunt was, he was most attentive.

Your cousin stood there at the top of the stairs, gazing at the room that stretched out like a hall and was lit by globed lights dangling from the slanting ceiling. He saw the overstuffed bookcases. He saw the tables heaped high with assorted objects. He saw the paintings crowding the walls, the chalked symbols swarming over the floor. If there was sufficient

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time for him to study anything in detail, he may have noticed the small Bosch painting, *The Alchemical Wedding*, hanging across from him. It was — and still is — thought lost. It's the typical Bosch scene, crowded with all manner of people and creatures real and fantastic, most of them merrily dancing around the central figures, a man in red robes and a skeleton holding a rose being married by a figure combining features of a man and an eagle. The nearest table displayed a row of jars, each of them filled with pale, cloudy fluid in which floated a single, pink, misshapen fetus; approaching to examine them, he would have been startled to see the eyes of all the tiny forms open and stare at him. If any object caught his attention, it would have been the great stone sarcophagus leaning against the wall to his left, its carved face not the placid mask familiar to him from photos and drawings, but vivid and angry, its eyes glaring, its nostrils flaring, its mouth open wide and ringed with teeth. That would have chased any fear of discovery from his mind and brought him boldly into the study.

It could be, of course, that Peter's gaze, like the boy in our story's, was immediately captured by what was hanging on the antique coat-stand across from him.

At first, the boy thought it was a coat, for that is, after all, what you expect to find on a coat-stand. He assumed it must be Mr. Gaunt's coat, which the butler must have taken off and hung up when he entered the study. Why the butler should have been wearing a coat as long as this one, and with a hood and gloves attached, inside the house, the boy could not say. The more the boy studied it, however, the more he thought that it was a very strange coat indeed: for one thing, it was not so much that the coat was long as that there appeared to be a pair of pants attached to it, and, for another, its hood and gloves were unlike any he had seen before. Where the coat was black, the hood was a pale color that seemed familiar but that the boy could not immediately place. What was more, the hood seemed to be hairy, at least the back of it did, while the front contained a number of holes whose purpose the boy could not fathom. The gloves were of the same familiar color as the hood.

The boy stood gazing at the strange coat until he heard a noise coming from the other end of the study. He looked toward it, but saw nothing: just a tall skeleton dangling in front of another bookcase. He

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looked away and the noise repeated, a sound like a baby's rattle, only louder. The boy looked again and again saw nothing, only the bookcase and, in front of it, the skeleton. It took a moment for the boy to recognize that the skeleton was not dangling, but standing. As he watched, its bare, grinning skull turned toward him, and something in the tilt of its head, the crook of its spine, sent the boy's eyes darting back to the odd coat. Now, he saw that it was a coat, and pants, and hands, and a face: Mr. Gaunt's hands and face. Which must mean, he realized, that the skeleton at the other end of the room, which replaced the book it had been holding on top of the bookcase and stepped in his direction, was Mr. Gaunt. The boy stared at the skeleton slowly walking across the room, still far but drawing closer, its blank eyes fixed on him, and, with a scream, ran back down the stairs. Behind him, he heard the rattle of the skeleton's pursuit.

There in his father's study, your cousin Peter saw a human skeleton, Mr. Gaunt's skeleton — or the skeleton that was Gaunt — rush toward him from the other side of the room. The skeleton was tall, slightly stooped, and when it moved, its dull yellow bones clicked against each other like a chorus of baby rattles. Peter screamed, then bolted the room. He leapt down the attic stairs two and three at a time, pausing at the fourth floor landing long enough to throw closed the door to the stairs and grasp at the key that usually rested in its lock but now was gone, taken, he understood, by Mr. Gaunt. Peter ran down the long hallway to the third floor stairs and half-leapt down them. He didn't bother with the door at the third floor landing: he could hear that chorus of rattles clattering down the stairs, too close already. He raced through the three rooms that lay between the third floor landing and the stairway to the second floor, hearing Gaunt at his back as he hurdled beds, chairs, couches; ducked drapes; rounded corners. A glance over his shoulder showed the skeleton running after him like some great awkward bird, its head bobbing, its knees raised high. He must have been terrified; there would have been no way for him not to have been terrified. Imagine your own response to such a thing. I wouldn't have been able to run; I would have been paralyzed, as much by amazement as by fear. As it was, Gaunt almost had him when Peter tipped over a globe in his path and the skeleton fell crashing behind him. With a final burst of speed, Peter descended the last flight of stairs

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and made the front door, which he heaved open and dashed through into the street.

Between Peter's house and the house to its left as you stood looking out the front door was a close, an alley. Peter rushed to and down it. It could be that panic drove him, or that he meant to evade Gaunt by taking a route he thought unknown to the butler. If the latter was the case, the sound of bones rattling across the cobblestones, a look back at the naked grin and the arm grasping at him, would have revealed his error instantly, with no way for him to double back safely. I suspect the skeleton did something to herd Peter to that alley, out of sight of any people who might be on the street; I mean it worked a spell of some kind. The alley sloped down, gradually at first, then steeply, ending at the top of a series of flights of stone stairs descending the steep hillside to Market Street below. From Market Street, it's not that far to the train station, which may have been Peter's ultimate destination. His heart pounding, his breath rushing in and out, he sped down the hill, taking the stairs two, three, four at a time, his shoes snapping loudly on the stone, the skeleton close, swiping at him with a claw that tugged the collar of his sweater but failed to hold it.

Halfway down the stairs, not yet to safety but in sight of it, Peter's left foot caught his right foot, tripping and tumbling him down the remaining stairs to the landing below, where he smashed into the bars of an iron guardrail. Suddenly, there was no air in his lungs. As he lay sprawled on his back, trying to breathe, the skeleton was on him, descending like a hawk on a mouse. He cried out, covering his eyes. Seizing him by the sweater front, Gaunt hauled Peter to his feet. For a second that seemed to take years, that fleshless smile was inches from his face, as if it were subjecting him to the most intense scrutiny. He could smell it: an odor of thick dust, with something faintly rancid beneath it, that brought the bile to his throat. He heard a sound like the whisper of sand blowing across a stone floor, and realized it was the skeleton speaking, bringing speech from across what seemed a great distance. It spoke one word, "Yes," drawing it out into a long sigh that did not stop so much as fade away: *Yyyeeeeeessssssss*.... Then it jerked its head away, and began pulling him back up the stairs, to the house and, he knew, the study. When, all at once, his lungs inflated and he could breathe again, Peter tried to scream. The skeleton slapped its free hand across his mouth, digging the sharp ends of

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its fingers and thumb into his cheeks, and Peter desisted. They reached the top of the stairs and made their way up the close. How no one could have noticed them, I can't say, though I suspect the skeleton had done something to insure their invisibility; yes, more magic. At the front door, Peter broke Gaunt's grip and attempted to run, but he had not taken two steps before he was caught by the hair, yanked off his feet, and his head was slammed against the pavement. His vision swimming, the back of his head a knot of agony, Peter was led into the house. His knee cracked on an end-table; his shoulder struck a doorframe. As he was dragged to the study, did he speak to the creature whose claw clenched his arm? A strange question, perhaps, but since first I heard this story myself I have wondered it. Your cousin had a short time left to live, which he may have suspected; even if he did not, he must have known that what awaited him in the study would not be pleasant, to say the least. Did he apologize for his intrusion? Did he try to reason with his captor, promise his secrecy? Or did he threaten it, invoke his father's wrath on his return? Was he quiet, stoic, or stunned? Was his mind buzzing with plans of last minute escape, or had it accepted that such plans were beyond him?

There are moments when the sheer unreality of an event proves overwhelming, when, all at once, the mind can't embrace the situation unfolding around it and refuses to do so, withholding its belief. Do you know what I mean? When your grandfather died, later that same afternoon I can remember feeling that his death was not yet permanent, that there was some means still available by which I could change it, and although I didn't know what that means was, I could feel it trembling on the tip of my brain. When your mother told me that she was leaving me for husband number two, that they already had booked a flight together for the Virgin Islands, even as I thought, Well it's about time: I wondered how long it would take this to arrive, I also was thinking, This is not happening: this is a joke: this is some kind of elaborate prank she's worked up, most likely with someone else, someone at the school, probably one of my colleagues; let's see, who loves practical jokes? While she explained the way my faults as a husband had led her to her decision, I was trying to analyze her sentence structure, word choice, to help me determine who in the department had helped her script her lines. A few years later, when she called to tell me about husband number three, I was much more receptive.

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All of which is to say that, if it was difficult for me to accommodate events that occur on a daily basis, how much more difficult would it have been for your cousin to accept being dragged to his father's study by a living skeleton?

Once they were in the study, Gaunt wasted no time, making straight for the great stone sarcophagus. Peter screamed with all the force he could muster, calling for help from anyone who could hear him, then wailing in pure animal terror. The skeleton made no effort to silence him. At the sarcophagus with its furious visage, Gaunt brought his stark face down to Peter's a second time, as if for a last look at him. He heard that faint whisper again, what sounded like the driest of chuckles. Then it reached out and slid the massive stone lid open with one spindly arm. The odor of decay, the ripe stench of a dead deer left at the side of the road for too many hot days, filled the room. Gagging, Peter saw that the interior of the sarcophagus was curiously rough, not with the roughness of, say, sandstone, but with a deliberate roughness, as if the stone had been painstakingly carved into row upon row of small sharp points, like teeth. The skeleton flung him into that smell, against those points. Before he could make a final, futile gesture of escape, the lid closed and Peter was in darkness, swathed in the thick smell of rot, his last sight the skeleton's idiot grin. Nor was that the worst. He had been in the stone box only a few seconds, though doubtless it seemed an eternity, when the stone against which he was leaning grew warm. As it warmed, it shifted, the way the hide of an animal awakening from a deep sleep twitches. Peter jerked away from the rough stone, his heart in his throat as movement rippled through the coffin's interior. If he could have been fortunate, his terror would have jolted him into unconsciousness, but I know this was not the case. If he was unlucky, as I know he was, he felt the sides of the sarcophagus abruptly swell toward him, felt the rows of sharp points press against him, lightly at first, then more insistently, then more insistently still, until —

I've mentioned the root of the word "sarcophagus;" it was Peter, ironically enough, who told it to me. It's Greek: it means "flesh eating." Exactly how that word came to be applied to large stone coffins I'm unsure, but in this case it was quite literally true. Peter was enclosed within a kind of mouth, a great stone mouth, and it...consumed him. The process was not quick. By the time George returned to the house almost

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a week and a half later, however, it was complete. Sometime in the long excruciation before that point, Peter must have realized that his father was implicated in what was happening to him. It was impossible for him not to be. His father had brought Mr. Gaunt into the house, and then left Peter at his mercy. His beloved father had failed, and his failure was Peter's death.

It took George longer than I would have expected, almost two full days, to discover Peter's fate, and to discern the butler's role in it. When he did so, he punished, as he put it, Mr. Gaunt suitably. He did not tell me what such punishment involved, but he did assure me that it was thorough. Peter's running away was, obviously, the ruse invented by George to hide his son's actual fate.

By the time your uncle told me the story I've told you, Clarissa had been dead for several years. I hadn't spoken to her since our phone conversation when Peter first vanished, and, I must confess, she had been absent from my thoughts for quite some time when I stumbled across her obituary on the opposite side of an article a friend in London had clipped and sent me. The obituary stated that she had never recovered from the disappearance of her only son almost two decades prior, and hinted, if I understood its implications, that she had been addicted to antidepressants; although the writer hastened to add that the cause of death had been ruled natural and was under no suspicion from the police.

If George heard the news of his former wife's death, which I assume he must have, he made no mention of it to me, not even during that last conversation, when so much else was said. Although I hadn't planned it, we both became quite intoxicated, making our way through the better part of a bottle of Lagavulin after I had put you to bed. The closer I approach to complete intoxication, the nearer I draw to maudlin sentimentality, and it wasn't long, as I sat beside my older brother looking across the Hudson to Poughkeepsie, the place where we had been born and raised and where our parents were buried, I say it wasn't long before I told George to stay where he was, I had something for him. Swaying like a sailor on a ship in a heavy sea, I made my way into the house and to my study, where I located the shoebox in which I keep those things that have some measure of sentimental value to me, pictures, mostly, but also the letters that your cousin had sent me, tucked in their envelopes. Returning to the porch, I

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walked over to George and held them out to him, saying, "Here, take them."

He did so, a look that was half-bemusement, half-curiosity on his face. "All right," he said. "What are they?"

"Letters," I declared.

"I can see that, old man," he said. "Letters from whom?"

"From Peter," I said. "From your son. You should have them. I want you to have them."

"Letters from Peter," he said.

"Yes," I said, nodding vigorously.

"I was unaware the two of you had maintained a correspondence."

"It was after the summer he came to stay with Mother. The two of us hit it off, you know, quite well."

"As a matter of fact," George said, "I didn't know." He continued to hold the letters out before him, as if he were weighing them. The look on his face had slid into something else.

Inspired by the Scotch, I found the nerve to ask George what I had wanted to ask him for so long: if he ever had received any word, any kind of hint, as to what had become of Peter? His already flushed face reddened more, as if he were embarrassed, caught off guard, then he laughed and said he knew exactly what had happened to his son. "Exactly," he repeated, letting the letters fall from his hand like so many pieces of paper.

Despite the alcohol in which I was swimming, I was shocked, which I'm sure my face must have shown. All at once, I wanted to tell George not to say anything more, because I had intuited that I was standing at the doorway to a room I did not wish to enter, for, once I stood within it, I would discover my older brother to be someone — something — I would be unable to bear sitting beside. We were not and had never been as close as popular sentiment tells us siblings should be; we were more friendly acquaintances. It was an acquaintance, however, I had increasingly enjoyed as I grew older, and I believe George's feelings may have been similar. But my tongue was thick and sluggish in my mouth, and so, as we sat on the back porch, George related the circumstances of his son's death to me. I listened to him as evening dimmed to night, making no move to switch on the outside lights, holding onto my empty glass as if it were a life-preserver. As his tale progressed, my first thought was that he was

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indulging in a bizarre joke whose tastelessness was appalling; the more he spoke, however, the more I understood that he believed what he was telling me, and I feared he might be delusional if not outright mad; by the story's conclusion, I was no longer sure he was mad, and worried that I might be. I was unsure when he stopped talking: his words continued to sound in my ears, overlapping each other. A long interval elapsed during which neither of us spoke and the sound of the crickets was thunderous. At last George said, "Well?"

"Gaunt," I said. "Who is he?" It was the first thing to leap to mind.

"Gaunt," he said. "Gaunt was my teacher. I met him when I went to Oxford; the circumstances are not important. He was my master. Once, I should have called him my father." I cannot tell you what the tone of his voice was. "We had a disagreement, which grew into an...altercation, which ended with him inside the stone sarcophagus that had Peter, though not for as long, of course. I released him while there was still enough left to be of service to me. I thought him defeated, no threat to either me or mine, and, I will admit, it amused me to keep him around. I had set what I judged sufficient safeguards against him in place, but he found a way to circumvent them, which I had not thought possible without a tongue. I was in error."

"Why Peter?" I asked.

"To strike at me, obviously. He had been planning something for quite a length of time. I had some idea of the depth of his hate for me, but I had no idea his determination ran to similar depths. His delight at what Peter had suffered was inestimable. He had written a rather extended description of it, which I believe he thought I would find distressing to read. The stone teeth relentlessly pressing every square inch of flesh, until the skin burst and blood poured out; the agony as the teeth continued through into the muscle, organ, and, eventually, bone; the horror at finding oneself still alive, unable to die even after so much pain: he related all of this with great gusto.

"The sarcophagus, in case you're interested, I found in eastern Turkey, not, as you might think, Egypt; though I suspect it has its origins there. I first read about it in *Les mystères du ver*, though the references were highly elliptical, to say the least. It took years, and a small fortune, to locate it. Actually, it's a rather amusing story: it was being employed

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as a table by a bookseller, if you can believe it, who had received it as payment for a debt owed him by a local banker, who in turn...."

I listened to George's account of the sarcophagus's history, all the while thinking of poor Peter trapped inside it, wrapped in claustrophobic darkness, screaming and pounding on the lid as — what? Although, as I have said, I half-believed the fantastic tale George had told, my belief was only partial. It seemed more likely Peter had suffocated inside the coffin, then Gaunt disposed of the body in such a way that very little, if any, of it remained. When George was done talking, I asked, "What about Peter?"

"What about him?" George answered. "Why, 'What about Peter'? I've already told you, it was too late for me to be able to do anything, even to provide him the kind of half-life Gaunt has, much less successfully restore him. What the sarcophagus takes, it does not surrender."

"He was your son," I said.

"Yes," George said. "And?"

"'And'? My God, man, he was your son, and whatever did happen to him, he's dead and you were responsible for his death, if not directly, then through negligence. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"No," George said, his voice growing brittle. "As I have said, Peter's death, while unfortunate, was unintentional."

"But," I went on, less and less able, it seemed, to match thought to word with any proficiency, "but he was your son."

"So?" George said. "Am I supposed to be wracked by guilt, afflicted with remorse?"

"Yes," I said, "yes, you are."

"I'm not, though. When all is said and done, Peter was more trouble than he was worth. A man in my position — and though you might not believe it, my position is considerable — doing my kind of work, can't always be worrying about someone else, especially a child. I should have foreseen that when I divorced Clarissa, and let her have him, but I was too concerned with her absolute defeat to make such a rational decision. Even after I knew the depth of my mistake, I balked at surrendering Peter to her because I knew the satisfaction such an admission on my part would give Clarissa. I simply could not bear that. For a time, I deluded myself that Peter would be my apprentice, despite numerous clear indications that he possessed no aptitude of any kind for my art. He was...temperamentally

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unsuited. It is a shame: there would have been a certain amount of pleasure in passing on my knowledge to my son, to someone of my own blood. That has always been my problem: too sentimental, too emotional. Nonetheless, while I would not have done anything to him myself, I am forced to admit that Peter's removal from my life has been to the good."

"You can't be serious," I said.

"I am."

"Then you're a monster."

"To you, perhaps," he said.

"You're mad," I said.

"No, I'm not," he said, and from the sharp tone of his voice, I could tell I had touched a nerve, so I repeated myself, adding, "Do you honestly believe you're some kind of great and powerful magician? Or do you prefer to be called a sorcerer? Perhaps you're a wizard? A warlock? An alchemist? No, they worked with chemicals; I don't suppose that would be you. Do you really expect me to accept that tall butler as some kind of supernatural creature, an animated skeleton? I won't ask where you obtained his face and hands: I'm sure Jenner's has a special section for the black arts." I went on like this for several minutes, pouring out my scorn on George, feeling the anger radiating from him. I did not care: I was angry myself, furious, filled with more rage than ever before or ever after, for that matter.

When I was through, or when I had paused, anyway, George asked, "Could you fetch me a glass of water?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

He repeated his request: "Could I have a glass of water?" explaining, "All this conversation has left my throat somewhat parched."

Your grandmother's emphasis on good manners, no matter what the situation, caught me off guard, and despite myself I heard my voice saying, "Of course," as I set down my glass, stood, and made my way across the unlit porch to the back door. "Can I get you anything else?" I added, trying to sound as scornful as I felt.

"The water will be fine."

I opened the back door, stepped into the house, and was someplace else. Instead of the kitchen, I was standing at one end of a long room lit by globed lights depending from a slanted ceiling. Short bookcases filled to bursting with books, scrolls, and an occasional stone tablet jostled with

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one another for space along the walls, while tables piled high with goblets, candles, boxes, rows of jars, models, took up the floor. I saw paintings crowding the walls, including the Bosch I described to you, and elaborate symbols drawn on the floor. At the other end of the room, a bulky stone sarcophagus with a fierce face reclined against a wall. Behind me, through the open door whose handle I still grasped, I could hear the crickets; in front of me, through the room's curtained windows, I could hear the sound of distant traffic, of brakes squealing and horns blowing. I stood gazing at the room I understood to be my brother's study, and then I felt the hand on my shoulder. Initially, I thought it was George, but when he called, "Is my water coming?" I realized he had not left his seat. Through my shirt, the hand felt wrong: at once too light and too hard, more like wood than flesh. The faintest odor of dust, and beneath it, something foul, filled my nostrils; the sound of a baby's rattle being turned, slowly, filled my ears. I heard another sound, the whisper of sand blowing across a stone floor, and realized it was whatever was behind me — but I knew what it was — speaking, bringing speech from across what seemed a great distance. It spoke one word, "Yes," drawing it out into a long sigh that did not stop so much as fade away: *Yyyeeeeeessssssss....*

"I say," George said, "where's my water?"

Inhaling deeply — the hand tightening on my shoulder as I did — I said, "Tell him — tell it to remove its hand from me."

"Him? It? Whatever are you referring to?"

"Gaunt," I answered. "Tell Gaunt to release my shoulder."

"Gaunt?" George cried, his voice alive with malicious amusement, "Why, Gaunt's on the other side of the ocean."

"This is not entertaining," I said, willing myself to remain where I was.

"You're right," George said. "In fact, it's deeply worrying. Are you certain you're feeling all right? Did you have too much to drink? Or are you, perhaps, not in your right mind? Are you mad, dear brother?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "Nor, it would seem, are you."

"Ahh," George said. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," I said, "I am sure." I might have added, "To my profound regret," but I had no wish to antagonize him any further.

"In that case," George said, and the hand left my shoulder. I heard

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rattling, as if someone were walking away from me across the porch in tapshoes, followed by silence. "Now that I think on it," George said, "I needn't bother you for that glass of water, after all. Why don't you rejoin me?"

I did as he instructed, closing the door tightly. I walked to George and said, in a voice whose shaking I could not master, "It is time for you to go."

After a pause, George said, "Yes, I suppose it is, isn't it?"

"I will not be asking you back," I said.

"No, I don't suppose you will. I could just appear, you know."

"You will not," I said, vehemently. "You will never come here again. I forbid you."

"You forbid me?"

"Yes, I do."

"I find that most entertaining, as you say. However, I shall respect your wishes, lest it be said I lack fraternal affection. It's a pity: that time you came to visit me after Peter's death, I thought you might be my apprentice, and the notion has never vanished from my mind. It generally surfaces when I'm feeling mawkish. I suppose there's no chance — "

"None," I said, "now or ever." You have Satan's nerve, I thought.

"Yes, of course," George said. "I knew what your reply would be: I merely had to hear you say it. When all is said and done, I don't suppose you have the necessary...temperament either. No matter: there are others, one of them closer than you think."

That was his final remark. George had brought no luggage with him: he stepped off the porch into the night and was gone. I stood staring out into the darkness, listening for I am not sure what, that rattling, perhaps, before rushing to the kitchen door. Gripping the doorknob, I uttered a brief, barely coherent prayer, then opened the door. The kitchen confronted me with its rows of hanging pots and pans, its magnetic knife rack, its sink full of dishes awaiting washing. I raced through it, up the stairs to your room, where I found you asleep, one arm around Mr. James, your bear, the other thrown across your face as if you were seeking to hide your eyes from something. My legs went weak, and I seated myself on your bed, a flood of hot tears rolling down my face. I sat up in your room for the rest of that night, and for a week or so after I slept in it with you. The following morning, I returned to the back porch to retrieve your cousin's letters, which I replaced in the shoebox.

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I have not heard from George since, all these years.

When I sat you on your bed after having found you surrounded by the shreds of my work, this was what shaped itself into my cautionary tale. It had been festering in my brain ever since George had told me it. Carrying George's words with me had left me feeling tainted, as if having heard of Peter's end had made me complicit in it in a manner beyond my ability to articulate. In giving that story voice, I sought to exorcise it from me. I recognize the irony of my situation: rather than expunging the story, telling it once led to it being told over and over again, until it had achieved almost the status of ritual. Your subsequent delight in the story did mitigate my guilt somewhat, tempting me to remark that a story's reception may redeem its inception; that, however, would be just a bit too much, too absolutely over the top, as James would put it. I remain incredulous at myself for having told you even the highly edited version you heard. It occurs to me that, if it is a wonder our children survive the mistakes we make with them, it is no less astounding that we are not done in by them ourselves; those of us with any conscience, I should add.

Something else: how much you remember of the literature classes you sat through in college I don't know; I realize you took them to please me. I'm sure, however, that enough of the lectures you actually attended has remained with you for you to be capable of at least a rudimentary analysis of our story. In such an analysis, you would treat the figure of the skeleton as a symbol. I can imagine, for example, a psychoanalytic interpretation such as are so often applied to fairy tales. It would judge our particular story to be a cleverly disguised if overly Oedipal allegory in which the locked room would be equated with the secret of sexuality, jealously guarded by the father against the son, and the butler/skeleton with the father's double, an image of death there to punish the boy for his transgression. If you preferred to steer closer to history, you might postulate the skeleton as a representation of an event: say, Mr. Gaunt and your uncle caught in an embrace, another kind of forbidden knowledge. Neither these nor any other interpretations are correct: the skeleton is not a substitution for something else but in fact real; I must insist, even if in doing so I seem to depart plausibility for fantasy, if not dementia. It could be that I protest too much, that you aren't the rigid realist I'm construing

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you to be. Perhaps you know how easy it is to find yourself on the other side of the looking glass.

No doubt, you'll wonder why I've waited until now to disclose this information to you, when you've been old enough to have heard it for years. I'd like to attribute my reticence solely to concern for you, to worry that, listening to this outrageous tale, you would lose no time setting out to verify it, which might result in your actually making contact with your uncle, and then God only knows what else. I am anxious for you, but, to be honest, more of my hesitation than I want to admit arises from dread at appearing ridiculous in your eyes, of seeing your face fill with pity at the thought that the old man has plunged over the edge at last. I suppose that's why I'm recording this, when I know it would be easy enough to pick up the phone and give you a call.

I can't believe I could be of any interest to George at this late date (so I tell myself), but I'm less sure about you. Sitting up in my bed last night, not watching the remainder of the documentary, I heard your uncle tell me that there were others to serve as his apprentice, one of them closer than I thought. These words ringing in my ears, I thought of that Ouija board you used to play with in college, the tarot card program you bought for your computer. I understand the Ouija board was because of that girl you were seeing, and I know the computer program is just for fun, but either might be sufficient for George. Your uncle is old, and if he hasn't yet found an apprentice —

However belated, this, then, all of this tangled testament, is my warning to you about your uncle, as well as a remembrance of a kind of your cousin, whom you never knew. If you believe me — and you must, Henry, you must — you'll take heed of my warning. If you don't believe me, and I suppose that is a possibility, at least I may have entertained you one last time. All that remains now is for me to tell you I love you, son, I love you and please, please, please be careful, Henry: be careful.

III

With a snap, the stereo reached the end of the tape. Henry Farange released a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding and slumped back on the couch. His beer and the pleasant lassitude it had brought were long

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gone; briefly, he contemplated going to the refrigerator for another bottle, and possibly the rest of the six-pack while he was at it. Heaving himself to his feet and shaking his head, he murmured, "God."

To say he didn't know what to think was the proverbial understatement. As his father had feared, his initial impression was that the old man had lost it there at the end, that he had, in his own words, suffered one mini-stroke too many. But — what? What else was there to say? That he had felt some measure of truth in his father's words? That — mad, yes, as it sounded — a deeper part of him, a much deeper part, a half-fossilized fragment buried far beneath his reflexive disbelief, accepted what the old man had been telling him?

Well, actually, that was it exactly, thank you for asking. Laughable as it seemed; and he did laugh, a humorless bark; Henry couldn't bring himself to discount completely his father's words. There had been something — no single detail; rather, a quality in the old man's voice — that had affected him, had unearthed that half-ossified part of him, had insinuated itself into his listening until, in the end, he found himself believing there was more to this tape than simple dementia. When Henry had been a child, his father had possessed the unfailing ability to tell when he was lying, or so it seemed; even when there was no obvious evidence of his dishonesty, somehow, the old man had known. Asked the source of this mysterious and frustrating power, his father had shrugged and said, "It's in your voice," as if this were the most obvious of explanations. Now, hearing those words echoing in his mind, Henry thought, It's in his voice.

But — a living skeleton? An uncle who was a black magician? A cousin he'd never heard of devoured by a coffin made of living stone? He shook his head again, sighing: there was some truth here, but it was cloaked in metaphor. It had to be. He walked over to the stereo, popped open the tape deck, slid out the tape, and stood with it in his hand, feeling it still warm. His father's voice.... Although the old man had quoted their story's beginning and middle, he had not recited its end. The words rose unbidden to Henry's lips: "*Slowly, the skeleton carried the screaming boy up the stairs to his father's study. It walked through the open doorway, closing the door behind it with a solid click. For a long time, that door stayed closed. When at last it opened again, Mr. Gaunt, looking more pleased with himself than anyone in that house ever had seen him,*

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stepped out and made his way down the stairs, rubbing his hands together briskly. As for the boy who had opened the door he was forbidden to open: he was never seen again. What happened to him, I cannot say, but I can assure you, it was terrible."

The phone rang, and he jumped, fumbling the tape onto the floor. Hadn't he switched that off? Leaving the cassette where it lay, he ran into the kitchen, catching the phone on the third ring and calling, "Hello."

His Uncle George said, "Hello, Henry."

"Uncle George!" he answered, a smile breaking over his face.

"How is everything?" his uncle asked.

"Fine, fine," he said. "I was just getting ready to call you."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah, it looks like I'm going to be a few minutes late to dinner."

"Can you still make it? Should we wait for another night?"

"No, no," Henry said, "there's no need to reschedule. I was just listening to something, a tape; I got kind of caught up in it, lost track of time."

"Music?"

"No, something my father left me. Actually, I was kind of hoping we could talk about it."

"Of course. What is it?"

"I'd rather wait until we see each other, if that's all right with you. Listen: can you call the restaurant, tell them we're running about fifteen minutes late?"

"Certainly. Will that be enough time for you?"

"I can be very fast when I need to be; you'd be amazed. Do you have their number?"

"I believe so. If not, I can look it up."

"Great, great. Okay. Let me run and get ready, and I'll see you shortly."

"Excellent. I'm looking forward to this, Henry. I haven't seen you in — well, to tell you the truth, I can't remember how long, which means it's been too long."

"Hear hear," he said. "I'm looking forward to it too. There's a lot I want to ask you."

"I'm glad to hear it, son: there's much I have to tell you."

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"I'm sure you do. I can't wait to hear it."

"Well, this should be a fine, if melancholic, occasion. A Farange family reunion: there haven't been too many of those, I can assure you. What a pity your poor father can't join us. Oh, and Henry? One more thing?"

"What is it?"

"Would it be too much trouble if my butler joined us for dinner?" As Henry's stomach squeezed, his uncle went on, "I'm embarrassed to ask, but I'm afraid I am getting on in years a bit, and I find I can't do much without his help these days. The joys of aging! He's a very quiet chap, though: won't say two words all evening. I hate to impose when we haven't seen each other...."

His mouth dry, Henry stuttered, "Your butler?"

"Yes," his uncle said. "Butler, manservant: 'personal assistant,' I suppose you would call him. If it's going to be an intrusion — "

Recovering himself, Henry swallowed and said, "Nonsense, it's no trouble at all. I'll be happy to have him there."

"Splendid. To tell the truth, he doesn't get out much anymore: he'll be most pleased."

"I'll see you there."

Henry replaced the phone in its cradle, and hurried to the shower. As he stood with the hot water streaming down on him, his uncle's voice in one ear, his father's voice in the other, he had a vision, both sudden and intense. He saw a boy, dressed in brown slacks and a brown sweater a half-size too big for him, standing at a landing at the top of a flight of stairs. In front of him was a great oaken door, open the slightest hairsbreadth. The boy stood looking at the door, at the wedge of yellow light spilling out from whatever lay on the other side of it. The light was the color of old bones, and it seemed to form an arrow, pointing the boy forward.

—For Fiona

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Here's an inventive story from a relatively new writer. Greg van Eekhout says he is a Los Angeles native who now lives in Tempe, Arizona with his astrophysicist fiancée. He works at Arizona State University, developing and sometimes teaching distance learning courses. A past attendee of the Viable Paradise Writers' Workshop on Martha's Vineyard, he has published fiction in Starlight 3 *(his first pro SF sale),* Strange Horizons, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, *and elsewhere. He says he's currently working on a novel that expands his* Starlight 3 *story "Wolves Till the World Goes Down."*

Will You Be an Astronaut?

By Greg van Eekhout

STRONAUTS ARE PEOPLE who ride rockets into space. They must train for a very long time before they go. Astronauts must be brave and smart. Will you be an astronaut?

The biggest rocket ever was the *Saturn V*. On the launch pad it was taller than a thirty-story building. Today's rockets are smaller and lighter. Today's rockets can be launched more than once. They have wings and can come back to Earth and land like airplanes.

When a rocket engine blasts out flame and smoke, it is so loud that windows rattle and the ground shakes. Everybody knows when astronauts are traveling to space.

Antonio is strapped into his seat. He is about to ride to a space station. Because there is no air in space, Antonio must wear a space suit. In the suit, Antonio can breathe and talk over radio. He wears a helmet with a special faceplate that protects him from the sun. The fingers of his gloves have tiny claws that help him work with small objects.

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The rocket is about to take off. There go the engines.
5-4-3-2-1! Lift off!

Astronauts come from many countries. Antonio is from Mexico. Other astronauts come from Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, the North American Diaspora, El Salvador, and other countries. Astronauts must be able to work well with others. They also must be good at math, computer science, and engineering.

In space, astronauts speak Spanish. No matter what language you speak at home, you must learn Spanish if you want to be an astronaut.

¿*Habla español*?

Mercury was America's first manned spacecraft. It was smaller than a car and could hold just one man, all scrunched up. *Gemini* was more roomy and could take two men into orbit. And the *Apollo* spacecraft was even larger. It could take three men to the Moon and back.

On July 20, 1969 *Apollo 11* brought the first astronauts to walk on the Moon. There are no plants or animals on the Moon. There is no water to drink or air to breathe. Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin conducted experiments and talked to people on Earth. They collected many Moon rocks, but their spacecraft was lost while returning to Earth. Space exploration is dangerous.

Astronauts must be very brave. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made one giant leap for mankind.

Will you be an astronaut?

Antonio's rocket docks with *Space Station Vigilancia*. The space station circles 19,000 kilometers above the Earth. It also has rockets to help it move out of orbit. In some ways, the space station is like a spaceship. It is shaped like a big donut with a needle through the center. Antonio's rocket links up with the space station at the bottom of the needle. He rides an elevator up to *Vigilancia*'s living quarters.

The living quarters are small but comfortable. Antonio cooks some of his own food in a kitchen and grows some of it in garden-bubbles. He sleeps in a hammock and exercises with weights and a bicycle. When he's not working, sleeping or exercising, he watches

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movies and plays games, just like you do at home.

Antonio replaces another astronaut. The old astronaut will ride back to Earth in the rocket that brought Antonio. Antonio will remain on *Space Station Vigilancia* for nine months. During that time, he will finally get to put all his training to use. He will use telescopes and other instruments to watch for incoming Asps. If he sees an Asp, he will track it with radio waves, and if it gets close enough he will blast it with the space station's proton guns. Antonio has practiced doing this on Earth for a long time. He is very good at it. It is a great responsibility to be an astronaut, protecting Earth from Asps.

If even a single Asp gets through, millions of people could die.

How did Antonio become an astronaut? Astronauts come from all kinds of places. They come from big cities and small cities, from mountains and jungles, from farms and refugee camps.

Asps destroyed Mexico City, the place where Antonio's parents lived. They had to move to the refugee camp where Antonio was born.

Here is Antonio in the refugee camp. He is standing in line at the depot. At the depot he is given a box with food in it. It is enough food to feed Antonio for a week. Antonio eats bean cakes and fruit paste and crackers with peanut butter.

Every time Antonio picks up a box of food, the people at the depot ask him questions.

"How do you spell *rocket*?" asks a man.

"R-O-C-K-E-T," says Antonio.

"Very good," says the man. The man is from Africa and works for the United Nations. He writes something in his notepad and asks Antonio another question.

Antonio can spell many words.

P-R-O-T-E-C-T.

E-A-R-T-H.

H-U-M-A-N-I-T-Y.

L-O-Y-A-L.

Not all the questions are about spelling. Some are about math. Antonio can answer those easily.

And some questions are very different. They are "pretend" questions.

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"Antonio, pretend your best friend is hungry. He has already eaten his crackers. When you go to the clinic to get your shot, you see a food box that someone has left by the door. The person who left it there must not be hungry, since they were so careless. Your stomach is rumbling. Do you eat the crackers, or do you give them to your best friend?"

Antonio says, "I tell the nurse there is a food box by the door."

The man says, "Very good, Antonio."

All Antonio's answers are entered in the notepad. After a while, people know that Antonio is very smart. When he is twelve years old he is chosen to attend astronaut school in Rio de Janeiro. It is a great honor to be picked for astronaut school. It is important to study hard. Always speak intelligently to adults. Don't be afraid of big words.

Antonio has to leave his parents in the refugee camp, and he is very sad.

His father hugs him. "Be good," says his father.

"You will make us proud," says his mother.

Antonio flies to astronaut school in an airplane.

He will miss his parents when he is at astronaut school, but he knows he is learning how to protect them from Asps.

It is okay to be sad when you help other people.

The Earth is beautiful. When Antonio has free time he looks through one of the space station's windows. Antonio learned geography at school in the refugee camp, and he learned even more at astronaut school. He sleeps with a picture of Earth over his hammock. The Earth is the most important thing there is.

Antonio sees blue ocean beneath the white clouds. The Gobi Desert is the color of a camel. The tip of Cape Horn is white like a polar bear. North America is green and brown, but parts of it are ash gray. Across Europe is a patch of ash gray. Across China is a patch of ash gray.

The gray parts are where Asps have touched down. More than two billion people used to live where the patches are. But nobody lives there now. There are no people, no animals, and no plants in the patches. Over two billion people have died in the patches since man started going into space. Many more have died because the people in the patches grew food for others to eat, all over the world. Now their farms are gone.

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People like your parents have died. People like your brothers or sisters have died. People like your teachers and friends at school have died. Dogs and cats and fishes and hamsters have died.

Do you have a pet?

An astronaut's most important job is to prevent people and animals from dying. An astronaut will do anything to save a life.

On the space station, Antonio controls the guns. Here he is at work. He sits in a special chair. Doesn't it look like a dentist's chair? Antonio's chair has a gyroscope inside it. If something hits the space station, Antonio will remain steady. That's the gyroscope's job. An astronaut must be able to concentrate on his job no matter what.

From his chair, Antonio controls twenty guns at once. The guns are satellites with little rockets that control their movements. Each gun is as big as a tram car. Some of the guns are very far away. Some are out beyond the Moon. Antonio aims and fires his guns with radio signals.

Some astronauts will spend their entire time in space without ever firing a shot. But they're still working. Firefighters are working even when there is no fire. Police officers are working even when nobody is committing a crime. Cleaners are working even when there is no quarantine. Working means always paying attention, even when not much is going on around you.

But now there is an alarm!

Robot detectors have picked up something. Antonio checks the computer. The computer can do math very quickly. It can figure out the size of an object, and its speed, and where it's headed, and even what it's made of.

An Asp is headed toward Earth.

Antonio is ready. He is very brave.

He waits for the incoming Asp to come close to his first gun battery. If he fires at the Asp and misses, the Asp will change course. Then it will be even harder to hit.

Asps are like pieces of string. They can be kilometers long, but only a few meters thick. They are like giant worms. They are disgusting.

Sitting in his gunner's seat, Antonio stares at his computer screen. He sees the Asp as a bright purple line. He tries to line up a red circle over the

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purple line. When the red circle is in the right place, Antonio can tell his guns to fire. The Asp moves quickly though, and it is hard to aim. It is important to hit the Asp in the correct place. Antonio wants to shoot it in a soft spot so it will break up into parts so tiny they'll burn away as they fall to Earth. But if he shoots the Asp in the wrong place, in one of its hard joints, it will break up into several Asp segments and will be harder to kill.

The red circle is on the purple line. Antonio squeezes the trigger. A signal is sent to his guns and they fire.

Oh, no! The Asp wriggles! It is not a clean hit!

Now there are four Asps.

Antonio's job is harder now, but he does not give up. Being an astronaut means never giving up. He sends radio signals to his guns. He tries to line up four red circles over four purple lines.

Number one is lined up. Antonio fires. It's a hit! The Asp segment breaks up into many tiny bits. He doesn't have to worry about them.

Number two is lined up. Antonio fires. Right on the mark!

Number three is lined up. Antonio fires. It's a bull's-eye!

Now number four is lined up. But only for a second. The red circle drifts away from the purple line. Antonio tries to aim his guns again, but he can't move the red circle at all. He hears a voice inside his head.

We have descrambled your code, the voice says. *We now control your guns. Thank you.*

Asps know how to send signals to Earth. They know how to speak over our radios and televisions. They can interrupt our shows. Recently, they learned how to talk directly to people inside their heads. This kind of communication is called telepathy. Asps may have talked to you. What did they say?

Asps want Earth to stop going into space. They want us to stop broadcasting radio and television. They want us to shut down our factories. They want us to stop drilling for oil. They want us to stop using metals. They want us to stop breeding animals. They want us to stop growing food on our farms.

When the Asps talk to you, it is very easy to want the same things they want. Some people have listened to them. They have started living the way the Asps want all of us to live. You may have heard your parents or

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teachers talking about "worms." Worms look like normal people, but they are not normal. Worms are people who do what the Asps want. How can you tell who is a worm and who is normal? Worms sometimes say strange things. They may say that machines are wrong or evil. They may complain about pollution. They may make their own clothes.

If you think someone is a worm, you should tell three grownups. You could tell your mother or father, and your teacher, and a police officer.

Remember, worms can be anybody. Worms look like normal people.

Even your parents could be worms.

That is why you must tell *three* grownups.

The Asp is coming toward Earth. If it gets through, everything where it lands will die. It will kill all the people and all the plants and all the animals.

Antonio's guns no longer work. The Asp has taken control of them. What can he do?

Antonio has an idea.

The Asp speaks again: *Your name is Antonio. Your favorite color is blue. Don't use your machines. Be happy, Antonio. Be soft. Hello.*

Antonio unstraps himself from the gunner's seat and floats to the space station's navigation controls. The space station has rocket engines that allow it to change its orbit. If it has to, it can even go to the Moon.

Metals are poison. Chemicals are poison. We will keep you warm, Antonio. We love you. Your favorite color is blue. Thank you.

Antonio wants to listen to the Asp. It has a nice voice. It is a little like his mother's. He wants to shut down the space station's power. He believes the Asp will make him soft and warm. The Asp loves him.

Don't be scratchy, Antonio. Call home. Tell them they can be alive and soft. We can make them alive and soft. Death is scratchy, Antonio. Hello.

Sometimes it is hard to do the right thing.

Antonio fires some of the space station's engines. He switches them on and off to steer the station. The space station moves into the Asp's path.

The Asp knows how to avoid beams from guns, but it does not know that the space station itself is a threat.

Through the window, Antonio watches the Asp come closer and

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closer. He thinks about his friends in the astronaut corps. He thinks about his mother and father back in the refugee camp. He would like to talk to them on the radio. He would like to be alive and soft with them.

The Asp is moving in fast. It is huge. Antonio is afraid. But it is just a purple line, he tells himself.

It is just a purple line, and I am a red circle.

He puts his hands behind his back.

The Earth is so pretty from space.

Astronauts are the smartest and bravest people there are. There is nothing an astronaut won't do to help people.

Sometimes schools are named after astronauts who sacrifice their lives to protect our planet.

What is your school's name?

Will you be an astronaut?

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Although summer is still upon us and most students have not yet returned to school, we felt the time was right to offer up this paragon of college application essays. By publishing it now, we give good students enough time to synthesize its lessons and model their own essays on it. Other students should have enough time to copy it outright for their applications.

Ms. Friesner denies that her own academic credits include a degree from Wossamotta U. Her current projects include the novelization of Men in Black 2, *a forthcoming fantasy called* E. Godz *written in collaboration with Robert Aspirin, and a fantasy novel of epic proportions that is currently in progress.*

Why I Want to Come to Brewer College

By Esther M. Friesner

NOBLE SIRS OF THE BREWER College Office of Admissions, permit this humble person to introduce oneself. My name, for this purpose, shall be Fred Schenectady, for I have heard it told once, at a lecture on this very campus by a notable author of fabulous tales, that a thing is called Fred because we have to call it something and that writers get their ideas from Schenectady because they have to get them from somewhere.

This sums up my situation, for in truth I am something from somewhere. Indeed, since coming to these shores I have found that upon first encounter I am often greeted with: "*What* in hell are you and *where* the devil did you come from?" Those who do not make these somewhat profane exclamations are few and far between, but I am proud to say that they have included your own august President of the College, Mr. Ferragus Franklin, and his lissome and beauteous underling, the Dean of the College, Miss Cecilia Hansen. How far under President Franklin one may generally find Dean Hansen is, according to faculty gossip, a matter of

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record closely linked to those times when the honorable Mrs. Franklin is out of town or ginned to the gills.

I disapprove of such gossip, for I find it low and insulting, particularly to those of us who, like my unworthy self, have gills.

Pray do not imagine that I make mention of this physical attribute in an attempt to procure special favor regarding my application for admission to your esteemed institute of higher learning. I admit that my appearance is singular when compared to that of the majority of your student body, but I assure you that I am in no way remarkable among those of my own kind. True, my skin is of a more luminous green than many of my breed, and the turtle shell which conceals the softer portions of my anatomy retains a high gloss in spite of the long hours I spend immersed in the great pond which abuts the Brewer College croquet fields, but such observations are the stuff of vanity. I will mention them no more. As for that saucer-shaped depression upon the crown of my head in which I bear a modest portion of life-giving water whenever I venture forth onto the land, it is of neither greater nor lesser size than the average among my people.

By now I fear that you may have grown impatient with me, for I have dallied somewhat beside the point of the required Office of Admissions essay, namely: *Tell us in your own words about a life-changing episode from your past and explain how this relates to your desire to attend Brewer College.* If I have delayed reaching the meat of this essay, I ask your pardon. I do not eat meat, though blood is another matter, and the heartsblood of this exercise cannot flow properly without some explanatory preamble. Surely none of the worthy applicants for admission to this venerable institution has ever willfully deceived your perspicacious minds by exaggeration, distortion, or other forms of falsification! I refuse to be the first.

So, the meat:

If memory serves me, my life has been neither especially long nor eventful. I am not old as my kin reckon age, having first seen the watery light of day from beneath the surface of a small river near Kyoto, during the first days of the Tokugawa Shogunate. By your Western calendars this would be sometime in the early seventeenth century.

My formative decades were unremarkable, filled with the usual

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round of seasons, festivals, and opportunities for luring unwary travelers and livestock into the river so that I might pull them beneath the waters and drain them of blood at my leisure. Blood was not my only means of sustenance. Like most of my clan, I developed a taste for wild cucumbers. Wise men who sought passage across my river always came prepared with an offering of these succulent vegetables wherewith to purchase my indulgence and a safe conduct. (Indeed, in my native land men call us by the same word which they apply to the cucumber, namely *kappa*.) So the years flowed on.

One morning, in the season when the cherry blossoms flower, there came to the banks of my river a maiden of remarkable beauty. At first sight of her loveliness I was enraptured, so much so that I would call this incident the first life-changing episode of my days. The stunning effect her presence had on me was redoubled by the fact that while her fine complexion and elegant garb implied aristocratic birth, she came alone to cross my river. There was a little wooden footbridge at that particular ford, as sturdy as I could build it, to tempt travelers, and as low as I could build it, to make it all the easier for me to surge out of the water and sieze them.

It was not the custom for highborn maidens to travel unescorted, with or without the availability of sturdy footbridges. Thus her arrival caused me grave wonder. If my kindred have one overwhelming fault, it is curiosity. Rather than bide beneath the surface, I emerged at once and revealed myself to the maiden. More, I left the sanctuary of my river and came out onto the dry land in order to accost her. To my surprise, she did not recoil in horror or dismay, merely regarded me with a level, confident gaze. Then she bowed.

Now to bow to a *kappa* is a ruse so ancient and common that all of us are well aware of it, save only the newest hatchlings. A person who makes such reverence to a *kappa* does not do so out of courtesy, but to beguile us into returning the obeisance, for when *we* bow, we perforce spill the water that we carry in the small depression atop our heads. That done, we are helpless and in peril of our lives.

I knew this. It was knowledge vouchsafed me by my mother with my first mouthful of oxblood. But love fills the world with fools, and I was so besotted by the maiden's dazzling beauty that...I bowed back.

How can I describe what followed? The water obeyed the Law of

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Gravity, and I followed suit soon after, falling nigh-lifeless to the ground. (Noble Sirs, I would have to drain you of more than half of your own precious bodily fluids for you to comprehend fully what I endured when my water spilled. I will perform this service for you, if you like, provided that it will not adversely impact my chances for admission. Brewer College is justly famed for its rigid refusal to look *too* far beyond a poor showing on the SATs, and I admit that algebra is not my friend.)

As I lay there, gazing up into the branches of the ancient pine tree that overhung my river, I awaited the death blow, for surely the maiden would destroy me now that I was helpless at her feet. To my surprise, this did not happen. Rather I felt myself being lifted up tenderly and submersed once more in the healing river. Full awareness returned and I leapt up to confront the merciful one who was both my doom and my salvation.

"Lady, why have you spared me when you might have so easily compassed my death?" I cried.

"Why would I want you dead?" she asked.

I spoke frankly: "Because I am a *kappa*, and as such a monster in the eyes of your people."

She shook her head prettily. "What nonsense! There are no monsters, except in the tales of long ago. Your appearance clearly is not human, but I cannot see how someone as small as you could ever be a threat, let alone a monster."

I longed to correct her misapprehension. "It is true that we *kappa* are small of stature," I told her. "A vial of poison is smaller, yet has the power to destroy a legion of samurai. Our littleness conceals abnormal strength. Thus do we manage to drag our prey beneath the waves and then — "

Ah, how could I tell her the exact manner in which we remove the blood from our victims? She was plainly of gentle descent, and this aspect of a *kappa*'s life is — forgive me — unspeakably crude and unfit for a lady's ears. My kind are unable to blush, being poikilothermic (I modestly call the attention of the learned gentlemen of the Admissions Office to my marks in the Biology achievement examinations, for which no algebra was required) else I would have done so.

All I could do was conclude thus: "I humbly beg that you accept my word on this matter, lest in some future journey you encounter another of my kind who may not grant you the upper hand. I owe you my life. I

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would sacrifice it sooner than see you risk losing yours through ignorance."

It was the wrong word to use. The maiden's eyes flashed lightning and her entire aspect darkened. "*Ignorance?*" she exclaimed. "Do you dare to accuse me of so grave a sin? I am to be the first princess of my house to depart these blessed lands and travel to America for my education! My glorious royal kinsman, the Emperor, would never dream of entrusting so much to an *ignorant* girl, lest that failing cause myself, my family, the Imperial house and all Nippon to lose face in the West. Do you deem yourself more perspicacious than our Emperor?"

Naturally I did not, and it was only a last-minute flash of wisdom that prevented me from prostrating myself — and spilling my water once more — to protest my devotion to our gracious Sovereign. A being may drink the blood of his fellow countrymen and still be a patriot.

"Exalted Lady," I said, "I did not know you were a princess. Pardon my foolishness and accept me into your service, now and forever. Only thus may I hope to repay your kindness and expunge my blunder."

Again she shook her head. "Let there be no more talk of service. The days of feudalism are over and done with, the era of progress and independent thought is at hand." She bestowed upon me a smile that rivaled the brilliance of Amaterasu, the ever-living sun-goddess, and added: "You above all must be thankful that we do not still live in those benighted times, for then I would never have come to this sweet river save in the company of many guards and servants. They might have treated you far differently than I."

"All the more reason for you to accept me into your service, Princess!" I argued. "The debt of gratitude which I owe you — "

She did not permit me to finish, saying instead: "You owe me nothing. Go, and live happily." With that she crossed the bridge and was soon lost to sight among the pine trees on the far bank.

Live happily. Those were her words. Even after so long, I still remember them. But how could I live happily, save in her presence? She had refused my service, yet I refused to accept her refusal. Obedience is our flesh, but honor is our blood, and flesh without blood is weak and useless and unpalatable. On that day I took an oath to follow my princess, even unto the land she called America.

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I will not trouble you with the hazards of my journey. Do not be amazed nor disbelieve me when I tell you that I was able to shadow her path here, to the campus of Brewer College, as easily as a dog may track a rabbit. We *kappa* read all waters as scholars read the secrets of ancient scrolls. My river took me to the sea, the sea to another river, and so on via streams both aboveground and below until I followed the final source into the pond which your descriptive brochures call Stillwater Lake. At last I was near my princess once more!

My princess attended your fine school completely unaware of my presence. I had determined to be her secret guardian, silent and unseen as any ninja. If she ever needed my protection, I would be ready.

She never needed me. Not once in all the years of her tuition did she ever find herself in a situation which my intervention might have improved. At first I rejoiced to know that she was safe and happy. This gladness lasted about a year and a half. Then, to my shame, I grew bored with so uneventful a life and began to seek some manner of solace for the tedium of my days.

If you wonder how I nourished myself during my princess's course of studies at Brewer College (or the Marcus Brewer Academic Institution for the Tutelage and Edification of Refined Young Gentlewomen, as it was then called) it is no less than I expected of you. You are compassionate gentlemen, for the Brewer College Office of Admissions must be as compassionate as it is noble, eminent, munificent, and unsusceptible to flattery. No doubt you realize that Stillwater Lake in no way resembles a busy river ford and offers my kind no opportunity to waylay travelers. Perhaps it is the ever-present layer of verdant slime that obscures the surface which preserves its solitude, perhaps the smell of rotting vegetation which keeps most folk at a distance. Your concern is touching but needless: In the days when my princess attended Brewer, the only creatures on campus more numerous than squirrels were transient Yale underclassmen much flown with wine. Both were lackwit enough to venture near my lair, both were equally tasty, and both were plentiful. The diminution in their numbers was barely remarked, except when it was applauded.

To return to my history, I grew bored with waiting in the pond and took to leaving it for hours at a time. At first my wanderings were purely

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sylvan, for the Brewer College campus boasts many lovely natural prospects. (I have attached a collection of *haiku* which I composed in those days, if you would deign to honor me by reading them.)

Soon, however, I found my attention drawn to the open windows of classrooms, and the pleasant drone of your faculty members presenting this or that lecture for the edification of the young gentlewomen.

Noble Sirs, can you imagine what it is like for a being who has spent all his life in water to discover thirst? I mean no thirst such as any liquid may slake, but the thirst for knowledge, for education, for wisdom and for that self-betterment which must accompany all. I blush (in the figurative sense alone) to recount that often, when I crouched beneath the classroom windows, I wholly forgot about my princess. Worse, by the time she had completed her course of study at Brewer College and returned to our mutual homeland, I had become so enamored of my furtive academic pursuits that I did not notice her absence until classes reconvened the following autumn.

Having proved myself so lax in a matter of honor, I could not for very shame go home. So I told myself, yet the truth of things was that I did not want to return. The princess's beauty had touched my heart, but the beauty of learning touched my soul. I continued to attend classes surreptitiously and to steal into the library via the bathroom drains so that I might pursue independent studies. In this manner I stayed on at Brewer College through what remained of your twentieth century. I witnessed a thousand triumphs, a thousand follies. Most certainly I was there when the college decided to admit gentlemen to the student body, although in those first years it was a trifle difficult to find any notable distinction of appearance or comportment between them and the young ladies.

I now reach the proper time to relate my second and more crucial life-changing experience:

It took place during those days which I had come to think of as The Desolation, for the end of spring invariably marked the graduation of most of that year's senior class and the departure of the rest of the student body. There were no more classes given, no lectures upon which I might spy, and the library always underwent so thorough a post-academic-year cleaning that I dared not sneak in, lest I endure a violent allergic reaction to the amount of chlorine bleach poured down the drains. Summer itself might

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bring special education courses or other intellectual enticements to the campus, but until then I suffered as a drunkard suffers who has been deprived of wine.

This brings me to President Franklin and Dean Hansen. Assuredly you are well acquainted with them, Noble Sirs. Thus you know that I do not exaggerate when I say that they are both of that physical type which might have led the honorable Mr. Charles Darwin to conclude that human beings evolved from eels, or perhaps stringbeans. It is one of the divine mysteries of this world how two people so lacking in substance were able to fill the evening air with cries of lust loud enough to rouse me from my solitary brooding beneath the pond. I have overheard members of the faculty compare such ungoverned amorousness to the actions of crazed weasels. I disagree. Weasels are vigorous but much more discreet when rutting, as a rule. (I humbly request you to peruse my study, herewith attached, *Mating Vocalizations of Academic Administrators and Genus* Mustela: *A Comparative Study*, currently under review at the illustrious and prestigious *Journal of Mammalogy*.)

Had the President and the Dean of Brewer College wallowed in their mutual attraction at any other time. I might have done nothing. But I was in the grasp of that bleak despair engendered by the end of classes and so threw my own sense of discretion to the four winds. I was sorrowful, and irritable, and hungry, and so I rushed from the waters of the pond in a foul temper and siezed hold of the nearest thing that looked at all edible.

This proved to be President Franklin.

I will not trouble you with a full account of our struggle. You may surmise that President Franklin screamed and kicked, and that Dean Hansen shrieked and shook, and that when she called out an offer to fetch Campus Security he stridently refused it on the grounds that he found death by drowning infinitely preferable to Mrs. Franklin making inquiries as to why he had been loitering beside Stillwater Lake unclothed in the first place. These were his last words before I got his face under water.

Up until that moment I had merely made my capture. When I had his head nicely immersed in the pond, I shifted my attention to making my kill.

As widely educated and erudite as you kind Gentlemen of the

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Admissions Board must be, I doubt that you have ever heard how loudly a *kappa's* victim gives tongue when first we set teeth to flesh. Permit me a moment of whimsy (provided that it does not harm my chances for admission) but it is the *site* rather than the *bite* which is so traumatic to our prey. Unlike your Western vampires, we do not take our sanguine nourishment from the neck. We are humble, and set our sights lower.

Much lower.

As one of our ancient philosophers once said, we are not merely humble but efficient. Why dig a hole for a new well from which to slake your thirst if you find a perfectly good one already awaiting you? I hope you catch my drift, for to be more specific would be unseemly, vulgar, and more suitable to an application for Harvard.

President Franklin is not brawny, but can exhibit unprecedented bursts of strength. I had barely taken my first sip of his blood when he erupted from beneath me like a breaching whale and flung himself desperately toward the bank. Dean Hansen had by this time somewhat recovered her self-possession and waded into the shallows to assist him. She clutched me firmly with both hands and, while her lover pulled forward, she dug in her heels and held back. My suction-hold on President Franklin was strong, but not equal to such a strain. It broke with a popping sound that was all but drowned out by my would-be victim's scream. President Franklin collapsed face-first onto the shore while Dean Hansen and I tumbled backward into the water.

I regained my footing in the pond just in time to see President Franklin sprinting away into the darkness and was immediately inspired to compose a *haiku* upon the image of the setting moon. Unfortunately, this delicate verse was blown from my head like a plum blossom by the gale of profanity blasting from the lips of the divine Dean Hansen.

"Will you *look* at that son-of-a-bitch run?" she declaimed. (Noble Sirs, I know you will excuse the inclusion of expletives in my unworthy application. I merely transcribe the words of another, for the sake of accuracy. I have dwelled among Americans long enough to learn that you value truth above good manners.) "He didn't so much as wait two seconds to see if maybe *I* could use some help! Not even *one* goddam second to say 'Thank you for getting this giant leech off my butt,' the skanky, pencil-dicked bastard!"

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She proceeded in this vein for some time. Ah, Noble Sirs, what a refutation of Keats was there! Beauty *is* Truth, but Dean Hansen's harsh judgment against President Franklin effectively negated all possibility of Truth being Beauty. When at last she paused for breath it was to behold me regarding her with deep and abiding awe.

"What are *you* staring at?" she demanded of me. Here was even greater cause for astonishment on my part, for I am, as I have already described myself to you, of a unique aspect *vis-á-vis* human beings. For the second time in my life, I found myself confronting a person who did not flee in terror at the sight of me. Fascinated, I took a step toward her.

Dean Hansen misinterpreted my approach as that of a hostile predator. Naked as she was, she dived for her purse, discarded with the rest of her clothing upon the shore, and pulled out a small, cylindrical object which she unwrapped instantly, revealing its snowy inner purity. Whatever it was, she regarded it as a talisman of great power, for she declaimed: "Stay back or this goes right into that pothole full of pond water on your head! I'm warning you, it's super-absorbent; it sucks up faster than Fergie on one of his alumni fund-raising sprees."

I drew back, startled by the lady's belligerence but more so by her obvious knowledge. She recognized me! She knew me for what I was and knew also how to defeat me! What wonder was this?

"Oh, stop gawking," Dean Hansen said. "I used to teach Asian Studies. I know you're a *kappa*. What I'd *like* to know is why in hell you're hanging around *this* dump?"

Her erudition impressed me almost to the point of inspiring a reverent bow, but I caught myself just in time. Humbly I replied, "Honored Lady, my original purpose for being here has long since passed away. Now I remain within the precincts of this beloved institution solely for the love of learning." I proceeded to render her in full the same account of my life which I have presented to you, Noble Sirs, during the course of which she used President Franklin's clothing wherewith to dry herself before redonning her own.

When I was done, Dean Hansen's fair face assumed a thoughtful look. "All those years and we never knew," she said softly, as though speaking for herself alone. "The stories about all those missing Yalies...." She cut short her musings and made a small sound of disgust. "Bah! I've got bigger

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problems. *What* am I going to do with you? Sell you to the *Enquirer*? God knows we could use the money."

"Brewer College is in financial difficulty?" I asked.

"In hock up to the eyeballs. We used to be something, a real bastion of higher learning. Now we're a name. Oh sure, you can trade on a name-brand college, lure in the status-hungry rubes, make the parents think they're getting the whole teatime-white-gloves-polo-ponies crap that went out with the fifties, but it doesn't last forever. Not unless you're Princeton. And the real cash cows are the alumni, not the tuition-paying chumps. What's four years of income compared to a lifetime?"

Her words were harsh, but her eyes were soft with a deep grief. Dean Hansen's love for Brewer College is sincere, as is mine, and her unspoken sorrow shattered my heart.

"What have I done?" I cried with utmost remorse. "All these years I have enjoyed a Brewer education yet never once have I made the smallest effort to repay this wondrous place, to secure its future! Oh, I am truly the leech that you paint me! I cannot live with this knowledge." So saying, I snatched the cottony talisman from Dean Hansen's hand and immersed it smartly into the water atop my head. Its powers of absorbency were as promised: It swiftly sopped up that sustaining moisture to the last drop whereupon I collapsed, gasping.

Yes, Noble Sirs, what you must surmise is true: I sought to die. I acted with deliberation and resolve, desiring that death expunge dishonor. If I am now alive to write this, my unworthy petition, it is solely thanks to the benevolence of your Dean Hansen.

I confess that her kindness was of a different style than that of my long-departed princess. Picking me up roughly by the neck and tail apertures of my shell, she treated me in the manner of a fire bucket, scooping me face first through the waters of the pond, then setting me down on the bank with a mighty thump once she had thus refilled my cranial indentation.

"Don't you *ever* do anything that stupid again!" she commanded. "That was my last tam — Oh, never mind. Look, if you honestly believe you've cheated Brewer by bootlegging lessons, then all I've got to say is killing yourself is one hell of a lousy way to settle up."

I was deeply abashed by this insightful reprimand and said, "Honored

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Lady, how can I then repay the college? I have no money, or else I would gladly provide you with tuition for all the years of learning I have stolen. My only means of personal support is — "

She raised one hand to silence me. "I *know* how you sustain yourself," she said. "And with all due respect, it's an image I'd rather not invite home to Mama. Okay, so you got a Brewer College education for free, but it took you the better part of a century to do it. That's almost like being a Comp. Lit. graduate student, which was Fergie's calling before he married the Dragon Lady and fell into *this* little plum pie. Now he's a glorified telephone solicitor, shaking down the alums when he isn't sucking ...up...to...."

Her words trailed off, her anger waned, her glance fell upon me. The fire in her eyes faded, to be replaced by a thoughtful expression. "Little *kappa*," she said, "how would you like to do something really useful for Brewer College?"

Thus, Noble Sirs, does my humble application for admission come before you, backed by the patronage of your own exalted Dean, Miss Cecilia Hansen. In this she has the full support of President Franklin, with whom I have made my peace and whom she has brought to see the advantage of having me as a Brewer student. They might have used their combined power to effect my matriculation without your instrumentality, but I refused, even though their intervention most effectively would have obliterated certain unhappy *lacunae* in my academic record, such as my lack of a high school diploma. If I am to gain entry to this fine academy, it must be done through the proper channels, on my own merit.

Yet I *must* become a student of Brewer College, Noble Sirs. I must, although I doubt there is anything left in your curriculum which I have not apprehended already, over the years. (As many of your students and their parents know, it is not the actual scholarship one acquires at college that counts for half so much as the diploma one receives. Wise men abound who have devoted their lives to self-education, but the common people still stand awestruck when an otherwise cloddish witling declares before them, "*I* went to *Yale*.") I must, I say, because only one who has successfully completed your course of study and been awarded an official degree may legitimately call himself a Brewer College alumnus.

Only an alumnus may become an alumni representative.

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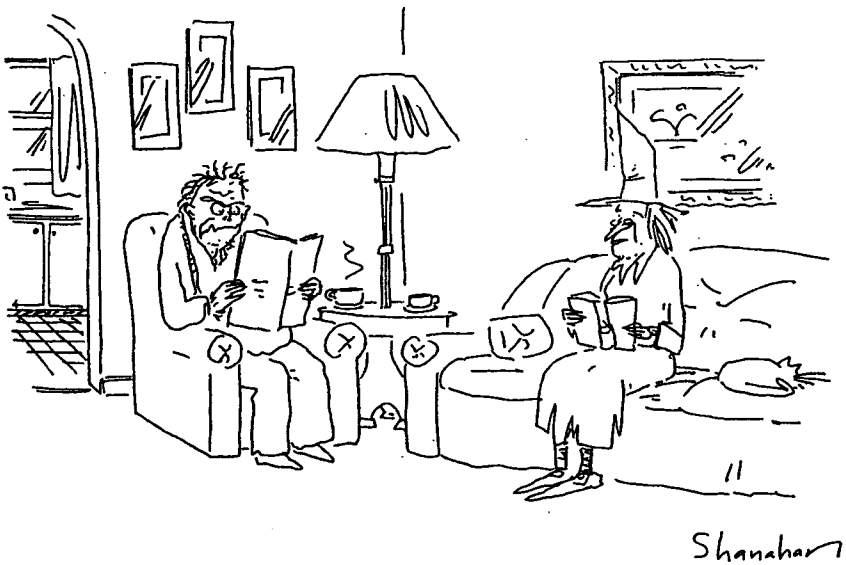
Only an alumni representative may solicit funds for the furtherance of Brewer College from his fellow alumni.

Only the most successful alumni representatives know how to get the largest donations from their prey, which Dean Hansen refers to as the fine art of getting blood from a stone.

I know this art well, though it is from softer sources that I am accustomed to extracting blood. But I am open-minded, and adaptable, and I believe that given five minutes alone with any of your wealthier alumni I could call forth from them hitherto unheard-of generosity, given the alternative I would offer:

Brewer graduates,
Open your checkbooks or die.
Such a simple choice!

And that is why I want to come to Brewer College.



"It's so quiet around here, now that the kids are fattened up and gone."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

PARADISE LOST, GONE, KAPUT

ALTHOUGH he is oft remembered for his adventure stories about Mars, Venus, and the center of the Earth, for most citizens of this world, Edgar Rice Burroughs means one thing: Tarzan. One of the most potent popular culture characters of the last century, Tarzan has been featured in more than forty films, silent, live-action, and animated.

On a personal level, I've never understood what all the fuss is about. Oh, as a kid watching old flicks on TV, I responded to the sexual chemistry between buff Johnny Weissmuller and saucy Maureen O'Sullivan — at least until the Hays Office made them tone it down. But I never really embraced Tarzan as a cultural icon. (And as for the novels, I've always found them unreadable.)

Intellectually, however, I get the appeal. As humans have become more and more civilized and tethered by their technologies, conveniences, and social conventions, the allure of the primal man as a fantasy figure has only intensified. Even so, such a fascination is certainly not new to the computer age.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, as philosophers and scientists kicked around ideas like Rousseau's "natural man" and Darwin's evolutionary theories, Europeans and North Americans were fascinated by tales and public displays of African "anthropoids," and even more with examples of the *Homo ferus*, or wild men. Victor of Aveyron (the case Truffaut explored in *The Wild Child)* was a sensation at the turn of the 19th century. So was "The Wild Girl of Champagne," and a hirsute Laotian child called Krao.

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Freak shows featuring monkey-men, apemen, and *femmes à barbe* (bearded women) became popular. Theatricals featuring ape-like antics, like the comic ballet "Jocko, the Monkey of Brazil" became the toast of major cities. And human curiosity and dread surrounding our close cousin, the "Orang-Outang," was rife in 19th-century culture (as evidenced in Poe's famous story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue").

For the past three hundred years, Westerners have been fascinated with the savage inside. How far have we come from our primeval past? And how much of it is still within us? Is our primitive state representative of something monstrous, or something ideal? We've never quite been able to decide. And although Joni Mitchell admonished us all to "get ourselves back to the Garden," the last I heard the singer herself was living in a mansion in Bel Air.

For most of us, the "missing link" has less to do with formal scientific study, and more to do with our approach-avoidance feelings about our animal selves. Pulp writer though he was, Burroughs understood this. Although, to his mind, human beings (at least the eugenically superior Anglo-Saxon variety) were endowed with a natural nobility and intelligence that made civilization an almost biological imperative, even if your adopted mama was an ape.

In the first novel he says that "Tarzan of the apes, little primitive man, presented a picture filled, at once, with pathos and with promise — an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance toward the light of learning." But is the lesson worth acquiring? Burroughs, despite his literary and real-life love of macho adventure, believed that it was.

Others are not so sure. They believe, like Burroughs, in the inevitability of civilization. They just question whether it's a good thing. Which brings me to the movie of the month, an anti-Tarzan fable called *Human Nature*.

Penned by Charlie Kaufman, of *Being John Malkovich* fame, *Human Nature* is a tragicomic tale that centers on another primitive hero brought back to the civilized heritage to which he was born, this time with less than happy results.

As the film opens, a raven hunts two white mice, and a male human body is found on the forest floor. The body belongs to a behaviorist named Nathan Bronfman (Tim Robbins). How he came to be dead

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meat in a woodsy paradise, and, concurrently a rather befuddled inmate in a surrealist white "heaven," is what this odd little movie is all about.

Nathan had been raised in a highly civilized household by a Mr. and Mrs. Manners-from-Hell (Robert Forster and Mary Kay Place). The Bronfmans were the type of parents who'd send their young son to his room, without supper, if he dared to use the wrong fork on his salad. Warped for life, but oh-so-proper, Nathan grows up to be a social scientist who sincerely believes that his (federally funded) project to teach table manners to lab mice offers some real hope to humanity.

Lila Jute (Patricia Arquette) was raised in a slightly less gothic version of suburban America. But she, too, is obsessed with controlling the animal in herself. In her case it's not about social ritual, it's about the light brown fur that started covering her body at puberty. Haunted by her hirsutism, Lila retreats to the woods where she lives happily as a nature writer (of bestsellers like *Fuck Humanity!)* until her desire to find a mate brings her back to the city.

It is her kindly electrolysist, Louise (Rosie Perez), who hooks Lila up with the still virginal Nathan. Lila, who is trying to keep secret her hairy problem, is happy to find someone to bed down with, even if it is an anal-retentive type with "a little pig penis." It looks like two lonely people have found someone to make do with, until two other players enter the picture.

One is Nathan's coquette of an assistant, named Gabrielle (Miranda Otto), a woman who so revels in feminine wiles and other forms of duplicity that she represents the completely societal organism. And the other is a man that Gabrielle is invited to name. In remembrance of her little dog, she dubs him Puff.

Puff (Rhys Ifans, Hugh Grant's grody roommate from *Notting Hill)* is a feral man, raised by his father as an ape, who is discovered by Lila and Nathan during a hike in the woods. Lila loves that he is "uncontaminated by civilization," but Nathan simply sees another lab animal he can "teach" and "save" from wallowing (as his mother used to call it) "in the filth of instinct."

Ifans's Puff is the perfect anti-Tarzan. He is pale and scrawny, and inclined to flee from any danger. In retrospect, he later tells a Congressional hearing that he thinks he was a pygmy chimp. But as a peaceable creature whose favorite social

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interaction is humping, I'd say he's something closer to a bonobo. But whatever he is, he is an absurd savage with little interest in polite society. That is, until Nathan fits him with a shock collar and his two choices are to humanize or fry.

Before long, tucked in a Plexiglas cage, Puff is listening to opera, developing a talent for wine tasting, performing Broadway tunes, and reading *Moby-Dick* beside an artificial fire. But is he ready for the "real" world — a social environment where nothing is honest or instinctive? Nathan gives him a little fatherly advice: "When in doubt, don't ever do what you really want to do."

Human Nature is chock full of more ideas, social commentary, and general ruminations on human identity and animal urges than just about any other movie you can name. If you want to leave a movie with lots to think about, then this movie is definitely for you. Unfortunately, as film comedy, it is only moderately successful. The tragic implications of how humans torture their minds and repress their sexuality is never far from the surface of the story. And Kaufman sadly concludes that once we've been indoctrinated into civilization we are tainted forever. Adam can't really go "back to the garden." Our paradise is lost. And I do mean forever.

Bummer, that. And not the most lighthearted message for a movie to deliver. Since most folks want their farcical fantasies more upbeat and uncomplicated, *Human Nature* did not exactly storm the box office. Kaufman and director Michel Gondry took an uncompromising — perhaps too uncompromising — view of their bizarre, yet brooding, subject matter. Gondry, who is well known as a very creative director of music videos for everyone from Björk to the Rolling Stones, uses old-fashioned filmic techniques like obvious soundstage sets and rear projection shots to create, in his feature debut, an artificiality that borders on hyper-realism. It's all very arty and intellectual, but possibly jarring to most contemporary moviegoers.

Likewise, with his fine cast of actors, Gondry encourages them to abandon the expected cheap laughs for a tone that approaches melancholy. Oh, there are a few humping and hooters jokes and an occasional touch of traditional sex farce. There's even a bit of fantastical whimsy, as in the closing shot of the lab mice. But the overall effect is of one somber, thought-provoking movie experience.

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I appreciate the fact that *Human Nature* tackles more subject matter than it can coherently explore in one movie. Ambition is good. And so is not talking down to your audience. I enjoy movies like *George of the Jungle*. And I think that weird, wacky flicks like that dubious kung-fu classic, *Lady Iron Monkey* (aka *Ape Girl)* are a hoot to watch, as well. I even enjoy Johnny and Maureen doing their Tarzan-Jane routines on late night television from time to time.

Still, a film that explores the metaphysical relationship between the Rousseauan natural man, a side-show monkey-boy, and the compromised masculinity of twenty-first-century *Homo sapiens*, now *that's* a movie that doesn't come around every day!

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — Mr. go-for-it, rah! rah! adventure boy — I took the one less travelled by..."

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A denizen of Port Townsend, Washington, Jack Cady is the author of more than a dozen novels and story collections, including The Well, Street, *and* The Off-Season. *His most recent book is* The Hauntings of Hood Canal *and he reports that progress is good on his next one, currently called* The Rules of '48. *He says too that a new collection will be out next month from Night Shade Books by the name of* Ghosts of Yesterday, *and in fact this new story will appear in the collection along with several new stories and an essay.*

Weird Row

By Jack Cady

WE DRIVE THE RENO STRIP before dawn and it's all bright lights and casinos: gin and tonic at five A.M., fancy ladies with drooping eyelids, the clank of old-fashioned slots and the zippity hum of electronics; an occasional rattle of coins. Dawn sees some gamblers weary with defeat and completely busted. They park before used car dealers and wait for the lots to open. They sell their cars cheap in order to get breakfast and bus fare home.

Me, and Pork, and Victoria (my comrades) drive through this glossy city as morning rises quick above the desert. We say very little, because Pork is dreamy and Victoria is crazed. We flee like refugees, though we don't flee far.

Storyland sits at city limits, between the town and the desert. When we approach, it looks like a hangar for monster airplanes, being of round metal roof and immense. It does not look like a book barn, though it is.

Once inside, Storyland stretches into distance like a stadium with fluorescent lights. Lights hang way, way up there, sending glowing

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messages from an awkward heaven. This is a freakin' church, a financial cathedral.

My comrades and I take our places before stainless tables, with dumpsters at our backs. I'm in the center with Pork on my left. Victoria giggles on my right. Dust collectors hum, conveyer belts slide slicky-sounding, and we snag packages from conveyors which trundle before us. We open packages. We work like dogs and are paid like dogs. Employee turnover is fantastic. Still, a few genuine nut-cases hang on; plus us. We like it here. We say we're on Weird Row. We're talkin' revolution.

The packages contain books, audios, videos, but mostly books. Thoughts and amusements of two thousand years trickle through our hands.

It works like this: The Corporation owns Storyland and sends books to every country in the world. Packages go out, but packages also come in. Packages arrive because when The Corporation receives orders it shops the Net. It finds needed books at small bookstores in Denver or Ashtabula or Cape Town. The small stores ship the books here for Storyland to resell. Workers who are higher paid repackage the books and send them to customers. Those workers get higher pay because what they do is boring. We, here on Weird Row, get the best part of the job.

Books on necromancy mix with Bibles, and children's picture-books rest beside dusty philosophies from two hundred years ago. History, evolution, how to raise a family cow...you name it, we open it...all kinds and colors of books spit forth, plus: there is packaging.

"Plus," Pork reminds me, "there's Package Police." He checks the terrain with heavy-lidded gaze as he speaks. Conveyers hum all around, and other teams open packages. We don't speak to other teams. Who needs 'em?

Pork looks rested. Many years ago there was a song titled "Mr. Five by Five." That's Pork. Five foot tall and five foot around, like a giant bowling ball with a fluffy head. He has hazel eyes and the kind of beard you find on billy goats.

"There's also denouements." Victoria generally sounds cultured. She is virginal and sweet and only slightly insane. She has no business in a candy-fanny town like Reno. Victoria should be gliding along marble halls while wearing a satin gown. She should be waving a wand that casts

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sparkles. Victoria is knock-down-dead gorgeous, little and cute, like a movie queen, like Hepburn. "There's visualizations," she says, "and actualizations and excitements. There's also a certain amount of stardust."

I make no big claim to sanity, either. If I am sane, why am I in Reno? My name...? It seems a guy would remember...I'm sure my mom recalls it, but she lives in New Hampshire. Around here they call me Smoke. Because I do, whenever I can sneak a butt. I'm skinny and going on thirty with bright eyes and yellow teeth; a nice smile to go with it, a tidy little cough. I lust after Victoria. Fat chance. Lotsa luck, buddy.

"Package Police," Pork says, again. Even wide awake and rested, Pork sounds dreamy. Dreamy is dangerous. When he gets too dreamy, Pork fondles books.

The Corporation can't allow that. A man who fondles books is liable to steal something: a notion, an essence, an idea. A man who fondles books might learn a trade, develop a philosophy, found a religion. All through history, book fondlers have been known to commit creative acts. Around here, Book Fondling is a godawful sin.

After all, those books belong to The Corporation, and The Corporation has its own philosophy. The Corporation not only wants its fair share. The Corporation wants to own Everything. The Corporation will not be stolen from. Thus, the Package Police.

"Our plot marches forward," Victoria whispers. She is excited. She places a book titled *Teach Yourself Celtic in Your Spare Time* on the conveyer, then slowly turns to dispose of packaging. Recycle goes in one dumpster, reusable packaging in another. The Celtic book had been wrapped in newspaper. A headline flatly states:

VAPORS EXCITE CAT SHOW, PULCHRITUDINOUS KITTY DEEDS FURBALL

"No story enclosed, just headline." Victoria speaks with some chagrin.

"None needed," Pork whispers. "We got enough to work with." Pork sounds as excited as Pork ever sounds, which is to say, real dreamy.

"Put a sock in it," I tell them. "We got problems."

A Package-Police cruiser has just pulled a U-ey at the end of our

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conveyor row. It heads toward us. The cruiser is electric and only big enough to hold one cop and one prisoner.

"Pulchritudinous," Pork says, and says it real dreamy. I give him a good nudge. He sort of wakes up.

This cop has missed his place in history. He's a perfect model for a Storm Trooper or an Alabama Deputy; an Adolf or a Bubba. He chaws on a toothpick and wears short sleeves to show his biceps. His brush cut stands spikey above blue eyes that can't help looking at the front of Victoria's shirt.

"You creeps, again," he says, and gives me a shove just hard enough to mess up what I'm doing. "Keep workin'."

I place a book titled *Ergonomics and Policy Reform in 13th Century Mesopotamia* on the conveyor. The packaging was bubble wrap. I toss it into the reusable material dumpster. Pick up another package.

This particular cop always shoves me when he's after Pork...something, Victoria always explains, that they teach you in cop school.

"You moved your lips funny," the cop says to Pork. "Say it again."

"Cheeseburgersforlunch," Pork tells the cop. It's one of our ready-made words. We have ready-mades for occasions like this. "We were talkin' lunch," Pork says. "Before that we were talkin' breakfast."

"And now you're talkin' bull." The cop knows full well he's in the presence of subversion. He knows we're stealing thoughts, but doesn't have enough to hang us.

We got rights. The cop doesn't even have enough on us to justify a mild beating. He's one frustrated jockstrap.

"With French Fries," Victoria says, and says it most sweetly. She zips open a package containing *Pachyderms of the Circus: Their Wit and Wisdom*. This one is wrapped in newspaper. She deftly, and with no seeming regret, tosses the paper into recycle. We who know her, though, feel her sorrow. We caught a fleeting headline, something like: SYMPHONY GOES 0 AND 1 AGAINST MENDELSSOHN.

Something to think about. And we will. As soon as we get rid of Adolf.

"We'd ask you to join us for lunch," I say in a loud whisper, "but then we'd be fraternizing." I figure the cop is so dumb he'll think it's a compliment. I think rightly.

"Another suck-up," he says. When he finally leaves we shelve

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Mendelssohn for the moment, then once more discuss a question of law.

It is true we steal words and thoughts, but we're not stealing them from the books. We're taking them from the packaging. Plus, things fall out of books: pressed flowers, locks of hair, clippings (usually obituaries or marriages), bookmarks, snapshots, postage stamps, love letters, receipts, and postcards. It's all throwaway stuff.

So, if it's junk, who owns it? The Corporation says, "Throw it away."

"You can't steal something that's been thrown away," Pork always explains. "That's our fall-back position. When we finally get caught, and finally heal up from the beating, and find ourselves in front of a judge, that's our defense."

"Pulchritudinous," Victoria murmurs. "Nobody is gonna throw something like that away. That'll be their claim."

"Plus," I say, "they got lawyers. They own the judge. We got minimum wage."

"And the joy of combat," Pork tells me. "We got the pleasure of taking stuff right under The Corporation's drippy little nose." Pork can talk vicious when he wants.

"Every day," Victoria murmurs, "I take an idea, or an image, or a word away from here. I set it loose in the world. That, I believe, is Pulchritudinous." Victoria sometimes gets a dazed look whilst talking philosophy.

She is describing our mission. Our mission is not to defy The Corporation, but to subvert. We are warriors. That's the truth.

When books go out of here, headed for Bangkok or Plymouth-in-England, or Carrolton, Kentucky, they look just great. The Corporation has slicked them. Spots on covers have been cleaned. Torn dustjackets have been repaired. Lots of them look new, and all of them look snazzy. Like Reno.

But, I've seen inside some of those books. The words are still there, the ideas, the theories, the stories; but somehow life is gone. It's like everything in them is written on a dying desert wind. The books show color but have no heat of impassioned brains or beat of loving hearts. It's a giant gyp. The Corporation keeps the life of the book and sells the husk. Just like Reno.

Our subversion comes because we hijack words, ideas, dream-stuff,

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and yeah, occasional stardust. We hijack entire concepts, plus screwball visions. We can take a headline, a cat show, and talk it through. Then, we take it outside of Storyland and set it free. If our new idea or vision can make it beyond the city limits, it has a strong chance for a healthy life.

"Lunch," Pork says, and really means it.

We get take-out burgers at a roadhouse, then roll the car a mile into desert. The land is flat and covered with sage. In some places small hills rise, also sage-covered. We choose our spot with great care because The Corporation has spies. If we get caught doing what we're about to do, the least that will happen is fractures.

I smoke a butt, smoke another. In the distance Reno seems to dance through heat waves, a tired and faded dance. The Corporation fits right into Reno. The Corporation came here because of tax stuff and central shipping. Birds of a feather.

We chaw on burgers, pretending that we hold a conversation about nothin'. We look here, there, every place. When we spot no spies, Victoria murmurs a little chant, tosses in a small but mystical spell. Then Victoria moves her delicate hand as if she waves a wand. She opens her hand. Pulchritudinous flies free.

Pulchritudinous dances like a tiny blue flame beneath a desert sun. It rises above desert sage, skimming like a splendid little bird. It bounces playful. It dives, circles, and sports around us as it seeks a destination. It finally heads out in the general direction of Tennessee. It's gonna have one whale of a hard time making it in Nashville, but at least it's free of Reno.

"What is the difference?" Pork murmurs, "between Storyland and The Strip." He's talking, of course, about the Reno Strip.

"Us," Victoria says quietly.

I know what she means. Of course, Victoria is crazy, even if she does have smart brains. I search across the desert, but nothing out there moves. It looks like we've pulled off a successful stunt, but a day will come when someone spots us. Scary thought, but I don't think that any beating we get, or even any jail sentence, will allow The Corporation to reclaim Pulchritudinous.

"Time to get back to Weird Row," I tell my comrades. "We still got to deal with Mendelssohn."

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Much of Albert Cowdrey's work takes place in New Orleans and features a crew of characters as odd as anyone you'll find this side of A Confederacy of Dunces. *His new story attempts to convince us that he gets his material by shaking the branches of his family tree. Don't be deceived. Mr. Cowdrey is actually descended from John Collier on one side of the family and from François Rabelais on the other, which explains why so many of his stories are finely-crafted, witty, larger than life, and sometimes vulgar. We've also heard that Charles Addams and Albert Cowdrey were cousins, but no one knows if this is true. After all, you've got to take everything you hear about this guy with a large grain of salt.*

The Boy's Got Talent

By Albert E. Cowdrey

ALL YESTERDAY AFTERNOON I struggled with a science fiction story, and the story won: the plot sprouted superfluous limbs like a sick frog; crumpled paper fluttered from my desk like the leaves of a dying ficus.

At five o'clock I gave up and settled in front of the TV to watch the evening news. Inevitably I fell asleep, only to be waked by the bleating of the phone.

Now, here was something odd: when I fumbled the phone to my ear, I heard the unmistakable squawky voice of my nephew Josh Bullard. At the same moment, his face seemed to be hovering on the TV screen.

"They're after me," he gasped. "I dunno what to do. I gotta talk to you, Uncle Bert."

Still feeling a bit disoriented, I suggested we meet at the Circus Lounge, and he agreed at once.

"Where are you going?" asked my wife, Alice, as I passed the living room on the way out.

"Josh Bullard wants to talk to me."

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"You mean he wants money. If you give him any, you better not come home. Ever."

"If only, my dear, you'd use your talent for menace for some useful purpose, such as extortion."

"You'd better make that silly story come out," she warned. "The bank account's getting low. *And no money to Josh.*"

I slammed the front door.

The Circus Lounge is my favorite oasis, twenty-three floors above the hysterical traffic of Decatur Street in the French Quarter. Greeted by Jimmy the bartender and an impressionistic decor of painted clowns, elephants, acrobats, and dancing bears, I sat down at the revolving bar.

"How's the writing going?" Jimmy asked.

"Not. Sometimes I think I ought to give up. Nobody wants fiction anyway. I'd be better off doing a badminton column for the *Times-Picayune.*"

More than wife or therapist, Jimmy knows what I need in such moods. He opened a bottle of malt-rich Mexican XX beer, set it down beside a chilly glass, and tuned his boombox to a classic-rock station where the Grateful Dead were playing "Dark Star."

The circus creatures picked up the beat, spinning toward me and then away. The bar was revolving, Jimmy was revolving, I was revolving — kind of a planetary condition. I began to feel I was viewing the world from a great height. Or at any rate, from a tall barstool.

"Hello, Uncle Bert," somebody squawked at my elbow.

"Oh, hi, Josh."

Small, bony, ill-clad, dim of mind and obviously distraught, my nephew climbed onto the barstool next to mine. We shook hands, and I ordered him an XX.

Josh likes to begin conversations in midair, and only gradually let you in on what he's thinking about. Tonight his opener was, "It ain't easy on me, not being nobody."

"My boy, if there's one thing you are, it's nobody."

"That's nice of you to say, but things ain't been good. I tell you I got fired from Tastee Donuts? When I discovered my talent I figured my life'd improve, but it just got screwed-upper."

The last item was news to me. "You've got a talent, Josh? What is it?"

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"Walking through walls."

The beer was good. The bar was balm to my spirit. If I went home, what would I do? Fight the goddamn story with the proliferating plot? Watch television? Listen to Alice complain about our finances?

"Tell me all about it, Joshua," I said.

Josh didn't know how he came by his talent. Maybe he'd always had it.

"Mama brung me up wrong. She was like, 'It can't be done.' And I believed her. *You* coulda helped me," he added accusingly. "You write science friction and crazy shit like that. Instead, I hadda find out for myself." He explained that a few weeks back he'd fallen desperately in love with a sophisticated older woman of twenty-four. Heather Crome possessed remarkable beauty, major-type hooters, and a virginal air of cool remoteness.

"The first time I saw her, she looked like a great big bottle of antiperspirant," he recalled, breathing heavily. "I figured, like, when she walks around in August her crouch don't even get damp."

But Heather was less than encouraging. "She's like, 'I got rich guys gimme nice stuff. So fuck off, Needle Dick.' She said it real sweet, but even so I felt discouraged."

Josh began to study her habits, stalking her not like a determined rapist but like a hopeful stray in search of a home. She lived in the Quarter and her favorite nightspot was My Blues Heaven. After work, Josh hung about her apartment, followed her to the bar and lurked in dark alleys, getting threatened by paranoid panhandlers and rained on by cloudbursts. Then he'd follow her home and fantasize about being invited inside.

But on the return trip she always had an escort with her. She favored a certain type, hulks with evident bulges on hip or in armpit. These must be the guys who gave her nice things. Josh gave them a collective name. They were all Kong.

Josh tried to cling to his original vision of Heather as cool and virginal, but he had suspicions. Thinking about what the Kong *du jour* might be doing with or to her almost drove him mad. Tortured by jealousy, he'd repair to some less than A-list saloon and drown his hopeless love in beer until his money ran out.

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The Friday night after losing his job at Tastee Donuts, he had his final paycheck to ravage and got drunker than usual. About two A.M., with pockets empty even for him, he lurched away from the Up-Yours Club on Bourbon Street into the broad, dew-slick lamplit emptiness of Canal Street.

A gleaming jeweler's window lured him. Inside stood a papier-mâché pig draped with pearls. *Don't Cast Pearls Before Swine,* said a discreet sign. *Give Them to Someone You Love.*

Longing desperately to do just that, Josh lurched forward until his shiny red nose touched its image in the glass. He pressed his right palm against the glass and his hand slipped through and his stubby fingers grasped the string of pearls.

He jerked his hand back as if he had touched fire. The pearls rattled against the glass and fell inside. Josh stared at his right hand. It tingled, then ceased to tingle. Cautiously he rapped his knuckles against the shop window; it was hard and cold.

Behind him a party of crapulous tourists staggered by, singing "Louie Louie." A street-cleaning machine passed with a roar of surf. The pearls lay heaped against the inside of the glass. The pig looked naked without them.

Slowly Josh slipped to his knees and then, feeling incredibly weary, sprawled on the pavement. He closed his eyes and quietly, gently, like a weary child passed out. He woke to find the vast blush of dawn filling the sky over Canal Street.

Such was the essence of his story.

Of course, I've expressed it in English, not in Josh-speak. What with repetitions, circumlocutions and lousy grammar, he took over an hour to convey what I have briefly summarized above.

I wasn't complaining. To hear such a fantasy issue from Josh's mind was like finding a peony growing on an ash-heap.

Spawn of my sister Nat — an amiable, boozy slattern — Josh grew up in a succession of trailer parks scattered around the purlieus of New Orleans. Nat rarely fed him, and her parade of scruffy lovers beat him up as a form of calisthenics.

Josh had a lousy life and he escaped it by telling ridiculous lies. When

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he was six he had an invisible dog; when he was ten he enjoyed an intimate personal friendship with Batman; at eighteen he was accepted into the Navy Seals; at twenty he was abducted by aliens. Banal stuff — absolute rubbish.

Despite the wretched poverty of his imagination, I always had a soft spot for the boy. After all, we crawled onto life's verge from the same gene pool. The Gene of Prevarication that gave me a career writing fantastic fiction made him attempt to lie his way out of his miserable existence.

And now, suddenly, came this story about the pearls and the pig. All my science-frictional instincts were aroused. Four or five double-X's gurgled in my gut and I smiled blissfully.

Misreading my smile as mockery, Josh said, "I know you don't believe me, Uncle Bert. But — but this — this — this is real."

A strained, desperate honesty throbbed in his voice. That, I thought approvingly, is the right way to put over a big thumping lie. The boy *had* found his talent — for telling whoppers. After twenty-one years of nattering nonsense, he was at last ready to graduate from foolishness to fiction, from devising trashy falsehoods to inventing a finer reality.

I signaled once again for beer and said warmly, "Tell me more, my boy. I want to hear all about it."

JOSH SAID that waking up on the marble-chip pavement of Canal Street was even tougher than most waking-ups.

Knees creaking, he clambered to his feet. His mouth tasted like refrigerator fungus smells and his bladder felt like a soccer ball full of BBs.

Yet he took time to check the window. The pearls were still lying where he'd dropped them. It hadn't been a dream.

"Shit fire," he muttered, inadequately.

He stumbled around the corner into Bourbon Street and peed on a wall. Standing there in the roseate dawn, he felt that a new day was beginning in every sense.

After years of wandering and confusion, of two-bit jobs and poverty and scorn, he'd discovered his unique talent, his shtick, the thing that he alone could do in all the world. He was downright blissful as he zipped his

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fly and started the four-mile walk to the Midcity slum where he lived.

"Jesus God," he thought. "I can walk right into Heather's place and see what's going on with her and Kong. And hey, she wants nice things, I can sneak into stores after hours and get great stuff to give her. I just need practice."

In the apartment he called, with good reason, "the Squat," Josh closed his eyes and fixed his mind on Heather's image — wasn't he developing his talent for her? — put his arm through the wall of his airless little bedroom and drew it back.

Next he tried his right foot, only to get something of a shock when his shoe fell off, thumping on the floor. Then he remembered the pearls. His shoe wasn't part of him and his singular power over his own body meant nothing to it.

By afternoon he'd gotten up courage enough to walk through a wall. It was a scary moment; he feared it might stop his heart. But the sheetrock pushed through him, driving his clothes ahead of it with a dry, gently rasping, ticklish feel. He found himself standing nude on the lino of the tiny fetid bath, facing a rusty tin shower stall.

He dressed and repaired to the living room, a thoughtful young man. He was still brooding when his roommate, a jackleg carpenter's helper named Archy Doss, came home.

Kicking his steel-toed shoes into a corner, Doss muttered, "Gimme a joint," and collapsed on the semi-defunct sofa.

Josh joined him. As smoke rose in an acrid ribbon and the shared joint shrank to a roach packed with cannabis residues, Josh stumbled into speech.

"Doss, listen. Real early this morning, you know? Something like totally awesome happened to me."

"Christ, you don't mean you finally fucked Heather."

"No. Something else."

"Well, if you jacked off like as usual that ain't nothing much, unless you used a handful of warm Noodle Roni like I told you to. *That's* kind of awesome."

"Watch this."

A moment later Josh emerged from the bathroom with an Econolodge towel wrapped around his middle. The look on Doss's face was the first real reward he'd had yet from his discovery of his talent.

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A search of the fridge showed no food whatever in the Squat, so they went out for a giant pizza called the Emperor Nero at Tarantella's. Josh's pockets were empty, but for once Doss sprang for the meal without complaint.

"Dude," he said through a mouthful of red peppers, anchovies, mozzarella and crunchy crust, "you gotta talent. So what you gonna walk into first? That julery store?"

Josh blushed. "Nuh uh. First I wanna go inside Heather's apartment. There's something I just got to know. You help me," said Josh, "and later on, when I start stealing stuff, I'll split with you."

"Deal," said Doss, and the two examples of young American manhood shook pizza-stained hands.

In Doss's ancient rattletrap van, they arrived after dark at block-long Talleyrand Street in the French Quarter. The curbs were lined with parked cars and the sidewalks with high walls topped by razor wire and broken glass. Quarter dwellers agree with Robert Frost: good fences make good neighbors.

One streetlight illuminated the far corner. Doss slid into the only empty space, by a fire hydrant.

"So that's Heather's," he said, viewing a door set between stone pillars under an iron lamp. "She live downstairs or up?"

"Down."

"Whatta we do now?

"Wait."

Doss unstuck a wad of previously chewed gum from the steering column, inserted it into his mouth and made popping sounds until the door opened and Heather emerged. At that he swallowed the gum.

After choking briefly, he managed to gasp, "Christ, look at them hooters."

Four yearning eyes followed the firm-fleshed opulent young woman until she rounded the corner and disappeared in the direction of My Blues Heaven.

"Okay," said Josh. "Now you know what to do?"

"You gonna walk through the door. When your clothes fall off, I pick 'em up and put 'em in the van. You find you a place to hide inside, and when I see Heather coming back I knock on the door to warn you."

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The two friends searched the shadows of Talleyrand Street, then stepped out of the van. The spring night was fragrant with the scent of secret gardens. From nearby houses came muted sounds of revelry; it was Saturday and parties were tuning up. Someplace nearby a dog barked; on the river, a ship brayed a warning.

Closing his eyes, Josh approached the lamplit door, eyes shut, hands out in front of him like a child playing blind man's buff. The dense oak resisted and he had to lean forward to push himself through. Once again his clothing passed ticklishly through him. Then he was inside Heather's home.

He padded through an archway into the living room, his bare feet moving from the cool of polished floorboards to the tickle of deep-pile white carpeting. The light of a dim rose lamp bathed couches upholstered in zebra skin. An immense system of shelves displayed a sixty-inch TV, a quadraphonic sound system with speakers the size of coffins, and all sorts of elegant doodads — figurines, china birds, Japanese dolls. The apartment was the most gorgeous place Josh had ever seen.

"Wowwwww," he murmured. "It's like Fuckingham Palace."

He passed into a bathroom with lavender tiles and little gold stars painted on a cobalt-blue ceiling and warm, moist air still fragrant with Heather's last shower. The curtain featured blue and pink bunnies humping one another. Josh tipped a bottle of bath oil into the palm of his hand and sniffed it greedily. Then, like a worshipper entering the holy of holies, he stepped into her bedroom.

A white armoire with gold unicorns for door handles. A bookcase filled with the Great Books. A king-sized bed with flounces and ruffles and a white Persian cat lying on a silk pillow, eyes wide, poised for flight. Josh spoke to the animal, then realized that it was a mechanical cat, the kind that walks and purrs and requires no litterbox. Glancing up, he was startled to see the bed, the cat and himself repeated in the depths of a mirrored ceiling.

He opened a closet door, touched a light switch, and gazed in wonder at rainbow-hued clothing and shoes enough to sate Imelda Marcos. He pulled out a slender drawer in a tall white cabinet and blushed to discover a treasury of lingerie. He touched the garments, not even knowing the names of most of them, and they slipped between his rough red fingers with the silken ease of garter snakes.

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He was still fondling these strange and elegant garments when a lock clicked and he heard the front door open.

"The action quickens," I murmured.

The Beatles were singing "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." Darkly the amber beer swirled into my glass. I felt like Voltaire's man of Jupiter striding among the planets; like Poe's Dr. Hans Pfaal, or Wells's Mr. Cavor visiting the Moon. It was a science-frictional evening.

Sighed Josh, "I'd never a guessed she'd be back so soon, not in a billion years. Even a million. She musta made a date with Kong ahead of time."

"So what was your lookout up to? Why didn't Doss spot them coming and knock on the door?"

"Well, I kind of wondered about that. But later on he splained. He said — "

ALL THIS WHILE, Doss was waiting in the van. He'd collected his friend's clothes and dumped them in the back among his grimy tools, and now sat behind the wheel, chewing a fresh stick of gum. The car radio had died long ago, so he amused himself by trying to chew gum and whistle at the same time.

Then Heather hove into view. Briefly the corner streetlamp illuminated her and her companion. Doss stared.

My Jesus, he thought, this guy is two linebackers wearing one suit. If he finds Josh hiding he'll turn him inside out through his own asshole.

His hand was on the door of the van — there was no latch any longer; he opened the door by hitting it with his shoulder — and he was tensed to sprint to the house before Heather and Kong arrived, when something roared and sputtered and a light flashed in his eyes. It was a cop on a motorcycle.

Doss blinked and gave the cop a big false smile.

"Good evening, officer."

"License 'n' registration."

Fumbling desperately, he found the two forms. The cop viewed the papers under his flashlight, then returned them with his judgment.

"You cain't park by this here hydrant," he said.

"I'm not parked," Doss protested. "I'm just waiting for a friend."

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"You wanna argue, I can give you a poisonal tour of Central Lockup."

"Officer, I'm on my way."

"Say, you ain't one a them fuckin' college students, are you?" the cop demanded with a sudden access of belligerence.

"No, sir. I'm a working man."

"Shitty way to live, ain't it?" said the cop and roared away.

By now Heather and her friend had disappeared into her dwelling. Doss started up his motor and began the slow process of circling the block. Everywhere except on Talleyrand Street itself, the traffic was impacted as a mouthful of wisdom teeth, and his progress was slow.

"And meanwhile, Josh, you were — "

"Well, Uncle Bert, like I say, I heard 'em come in the front door. But they didn't stop there. Heather headed straight down the hall to her bedroom, while Kong, he come by way of the bathroom where he started to pee. My Lord, you shoulda heard him pee! He sounded like Viagra Falls.

"I hid in the closet, but guess where Heather headed for first? So there I was, caught, and just as she come in the closet door I jumped through the wall at the end without no idea of where it might lead to."

UNDER THE SHEETROCK the thick wall of nineteenth-century bonded masonry felt gritty and resistant. For a moment Josh was terrified by the thought that he might get trapped in it and suffocate. He gave a frenzied kick and suddenly stumbled into a scene from a madhouse.

People with horse's heads, with hoop skirts, with suits of armor, with nets and tridents; men and women painted gold or silver, many wearing only a tad more than Josh himself. Lights flashing in many colors, and deafening rock.

A tall bony woman impersonating Morticia sidled up and took Josh's arm. Under a slim mask she had a wide raspberry-colored mouth and teeth like sugar cubes. Her breath was distilled Southern Comfort.

"Hey, that *is* a costume," she said admiringly. "But the invitation said Masks Required. Come on."

She led him — feeling he had entered a dream; strolling naked among a crowd of strangers, none of whom spared him more than a glance — into a small room where a pile of masks reposed on a table.

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"Some people forget," she said, fitting a mask onto his face. Then she pushed him back into the party.

"Hey, Sybil, this yours?" she asked a woman in a Hillary Clinton headmask.

Through the eyeholes, two critical orbs swept Josh from head to toe.

"Nuh uh. Must be Cherie's — she likes pipsqueaks. Kid, you oughta work on those pecs. And that pecker."

"Be nice," said the hostess. "Not everybody has the balls to come to a party naked."

"Ball bearings, you mean," said Sybil.

"Pay no attention, honey," said the hostess. "I like a man who's at ease with his own inadequacy. Wanna dance?"

Josh mumbled that he couldn't dance.

"Then let's go where it's private and suck some face," she said, leading him back into the dressing room with the pile of masks. It was while she was closing and bolting the door that Josh leaped into the wall.

Again the bricks and mortar were resistant. He felt the mask pass through his brain like a nagging headache and vanish. He was standing in near-darkness, amid a crowd of strangers in sinuous, somehow coordinated motion. The rock was, if possible, louder than before.

Somebody embraced him and drew him into the surging mass. Belatedly, Josh realized that he needn't feel out of place here: everybody was naked, and everybody was male.

"W-what's going on?" he managed to gasp.

"The orgy, Sweetheart, the orgy," said somebody behind him. "Can you spread a little?"

The smells of sweat and incense were thick. Everyone was heavily greased, so Josh was able to squeegee through the crowd and find another wall into which he plunged, head first. But when he was half through, strong arms caught him around the waist.

For a long moment he floundered, arms and legs waving ineffectually on opposite sides of the wall, while unseen fingers began to do the spreading for him. A desperate kick sent him head over heels into a flagstoned patio, where for a moment he rested, gasping for breath.

Far above, coolly ironic stars were shining, and down below Josh was just reaching the point where he could rationally evaluate his situation

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when a dense form detached itself from the shadows and a low growl informed him that his night's adventures were not yet over.

There was a Rottweiler in the patio.

"Well, go on!" I urged Josh.

"Uncle Bert?"

"What?"

"I was just wondering if you really, really believe me. Because for once in my life I ain't been telling you nothing except the honest truth."

I clapped my right palm against my sternum.

"I believe you, Josh, because I believe in the profound truth of fiction. The underlying, the submarine, the subterranean truth. The truth that doesn't lie on the surface, but surges beneath like an alligator making ripples in a carpet of duckweed. Allow me to buy you another beer," I added, waving at Jimmy.

Josh stared at me in utter bafflement. I think he relished my good will, without in any way comprehending what the good will was based upon.

"Now," I said firmly. "Back to you and the Rottweiler."

The dog looked in the dim light like a fuzzy battering ram with teeth. Josh had a distinct feeling that saying Nice Doggy wouldn't work.

Instead he gathered his weary legs under him and suddenly leaped up and sprinted for the nearest wall. He heard a furious scrabble of claws behind him and dove headlong.

Once again he did a somersault, only this time he wound up resting on his shoulders with his feet high above his head. A quivering banana tree had stopped him in mid-revolution. Looking up, he saw his toes outlined against the sky.

Cautiously he lowered his legs and righted himself. After orgies and Rotts, he seemed to have gone up a notch on the social scale. The patio was large and hidden globes backlit masses of white azaleas. Ten or twelve couples were seated at little tables on which candle flames quavered.

Polite, muted conversations were underway. A string quartet played something classical. Josh began to sidle along the wall behind the screen of trees. Then froze; an elderly man and woman were staring at him.

"I saw it move."

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"What the hell do you mean, you saw it move?"

"That statue of David or somebody. I'm sure I saw it move."

"Either you've had too much champagne or not enough. Let's assume not enough. Waiter!"

The woman continued to stare.

"It's an absolutely rotten copy," she opined. "With all her money you'd think Dallas could get something better."

The waiter appeared with a fresh bottle and began the ritual of uncorking. Josh was wondering if it was safe for him to move on when the cork blew off and smacked him above the left eye.

"Ow!" he said, but the quartet just then began to saw away again and his cry of pain went unnoticed.

Since everybody seemed oblivious to everything except talk and booze and, possibly, the music, Josh began to hope that he could find some way to end his night's adventure.

Then the answer came to him. While everybody was here in the patio, he would enter the house through the nearest wall and begin a search for male attire, any male attire that would let him walk out into the street and find Doss's van.

Having a plan felt so good that he almost laughed aloud. The quartet was working itself into a frenzy and all the guests were deep in talk and the waiters were occupied waiting. Josh slid along the wall, freezing whenever somebody turned in his direction.

A tuxedoed bartender lounging near an array of bottles blocked access to the main house. But an ell projected — slave quarters or kitchens in times past — and Josh took a breath and pushed through still another thick Quarter wall into a narrow, dark space.

Something promptly whacked him on the shins, and when he moved something else jabbed his ribs.

"Ow!" he said again.

He was in a storeroom of abandoned furniture. Chairs were heaped on chairs, tables on tables. Slowly he worked himself through the maze, things passing through him that he never saw, nudging internal organs, shedding dust into his lungs and making him cough. He found a narrow stair, climbed to the top, slipped through a locked door, and emerged into a hallway of creamy plaster.

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He was in the main house now, a Persian runner caressing his feet, oil portraits of sour-looking gents gazing down in disapproval at the little bony naked nobody in their midst. Feeling that his troubles were almost over, Josh sprang like a gazelle through a wall into a plushy boudoir, where an old lady sat, reading a copy of *Vogue* and smoking a joint.

She turned toward him a smooth, immobile face with a nose shaped like the business end of a cottonmouth moccasin and nostrils that ran up instead of out. Josh had never seen such a face and he stopped dead, gawking.

"Many lace fits," I explained.

"What?"

"Many face lifts," I corrected myself, realizing that I had, after all, had a lot of beer by this time. "Somebody gets too many, that's how their face looks."

"Oh," he said. "It was kind of scary."

"So what did the snake lady do when she saw you?"

"Well, she's like, 'Where the hell you come from, Sonny?' And I'm like, 'From the party downstairs.' And she's l — "

But I can't bring myself to reproduce any more of Josh's narrative style.

She said, "Yeah, right. I can just see you down there with that bunch of bores, sitting around in your bare ass listening to Mozart."

She added, "They probably think Moe's his first name."

Josh had assumed the traditional posture of a man exposed, crossing his small hands over his smaller private parts.

"Me, I'm Dallas Doolittle," the woman continued. "I entertain this bunch of prominent assholes because I'm a civic leader. But from time to time I just gotta take me a dope break. Sit down, for Christ sakes."

She patted a cushion beside her on a glossy divan with a hundred silken buttons. Josh sat down uneasily, as far away from her as possible.

"Don't think because you got no clothes on and this is my bood-wah, you can do whatever you like," Dallas warned him. "I don't rape easy. You wanna blow some pot?"

"Uhhhhh...yes, ma'am," said Josh. He had heard the phrase once before, in a Cheech and Chong movie.

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She passed him the joint and he inhaled deeply. It was superb, a product of cannabis buds developed under grow-light in a secret attic by some anonymous genius of intoxication.

"Wowwwwww," he murmured. Dallas took the joint back and puffed reflectively.

"Now," she said. "Cut the crap, Sonny, and tell me how you lost your clothes and how you got in here."

"I come through the wall."

"You what?"

"Like this," he said and, half-turning, thrust his arm into the wall behind him. He pulled it out covered with whitish plaster dust, and brushed it off with slow, casual strokes.

"Oh, my God," gaped Dallas. "Oh, my God. This old brain's going. I've smoked too much of this fucking dope."

"No," said Josh. "It's my talent. I walk through walls. Can I have that joint back?"

Dallas passed it to him, saying, "You finish it. I'm off this shit till Tuesday. Maybe longer."

"This is *summmmm* powerful," he muttered, inhaling deeply. "See, I was in a house somewheres around here. It belongs to this lady name of Heather. I wanna get next to her but she's like, 'Whoa — who needs it?' and I'm like, 'Hey. I do.' And she's like...and she's like...."

Josh lost the thread of his discourse. Dallas came to his aid.

"Heather Crome? She lives next door."

Dallas pointed at the wall opposite.

"I've tried to talk to that girl. I tell her, 'Honey, it's okay to be a whore, if it worked for Pamela Harriman it can work for you, but you keep hanging out with wiseguys, you gonna regret it.'"

With no joint to hold, her long thin right hand was free and she ran it down the rack of bones he called a chest. Sweat broke out on his brow.

"Uh, ma'am?" he said. "I don't — I don't think — I — "

"Whassamatta, honey? Lemme check this out," said Dallas, checking. "Christ, how do you get it out to pee? Go fishing with a buttonhook? Oh, well, it's kind of cute, actually. Makes me think of diapering my grandson."

"Whoa!" cried Josh, shaking off her hand and jumping to his feet.

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His head swimming from the superpot, he stared wildly around the room, at silken overstuffed furniture, at Dallas's ophidian face.

Then in three wildly uncoordinated leaps he reached the far wall and plunged into it head first.

"You know what, Josh?"

"What?"

"Tonight, for the first time, I truly feel that we are kin. You have devised a veritable Thousand-and-Second Tale of Sheherazade. Such richness of invention, supported by such a plethora of almost convincing detail!"

The Platters were singing "The Great Pretender," and for a few minutes I sang along with them, to Josh's evident embarrassment. To stop my impromptu karaoke, he said hurriedly: "It's great having you believe me, Uncle Bert. Lotsa people wooden."

I smiled upon him like a Happy Face come to life.

"Please continue, nephew of mine. You plunged into the wall, and — "

JOSH SAW the apartment above Heather's only as a brief, incoherent jumble of lights before falling head first through its polished floor.

Then he was hanging halfway out of the mirrored ceiling of Heather's bedroom over the immense white bed. Large and white too was Heather's upturned backside and, as Josh looked on in horror, Kong, stripped to his fur, deliberately swung a broad black belt and smacked her quivering flesh.

Heather twisted in pain and a kind of despairing moo escaped her lips, but no more, because she had been gagged with some of her own underthings and her hands and feet had been tied with similar silken bonds.

"CUT THAT OUT!" roared Josh in a voice he didn't know he owned.

Her tormentor looked up and saw Josh dangling from the mirror, bizarrely centered amid octopuslike images of his head and arms. Kong's mouth fell so far open that Josh could see two gold molars in back. Then Josh slipped the rest of the way through the ceiling and plunged downward, holding both arms stiff and fists knotted. Kong's nose crunched and splattered under the impact.

Together they crashed to the floor. Josh was up first, seized the belt

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and began to use it on Kong, who, blinded by his own blood and holding his dripping face in both hands, stumbled about the room, shattering bric-a-brac and crushing the mechanical cat, which perished with one despairing cry.

Then he lurched into the hallway and thundered to the front door, threw it open and ran into Talleyrand Street, where by one of those coincidences so common in life, though forbidden in all respectable fiction, Doss's van flattened him like an armadillo on a Texas highway.

Josh slammed the front door and bolted it firmly. He dropped the belt, returned to Heather's bedroom, and gently untied her. When he took out the gag she spoke to him in a voice as dulcet as the melodies of Moe Zart.

"Christ, Honey," she murmured, awestruck, "how'd a shrimp like you run that big motherfucker off?"

Later on, when a blushing Josh had applied Benzocaine to her injured hiney, and she'd fixed them both scotches from a wet bar concealed behind the Great Books, and they were resting together on her bed — Josh sitting up, Heather on her tummy — she had other questions.

"Where was you hiding at?" she wanted to know. "And where's your clothes? Say, ain't you that little jerk been after me to go out with him?"

He admitted as much.

"And if you'd a been with me," he pointed out, "you'd a been better off than with K — with that other guy."

"I know," she sighed. "It's the only thing I don't like about being a whore. You meet such lowlifes sometimes."

Wincing, she sat up. Josh was fascinated by the hooters Doss had earlier commented on. One of them seemed to gaze straight at him with a moist brown/pink eye, while the other, sagging to one side, appeared pensive, dreamy.

"So what'd you do?" she resumed. "Sneak in here and hide?"

"Sort of," he mumbled.

"Why? Joo wanna watch me git nekkid?"

Staring deep into the amber depths of the scotch that was now numbing his brain, which was still imperfectly denumbed from the effects of Dallas's pot, Josh mumbled the truth.

"Nuh uh. I wanted to see what you was doing with those other guys. I got jealous because I love you."

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"Love?" she asked, as if the word denoted some exotic mineral available only on the Planet Krypton.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, Honey" — her voice was like wind chimes on a fern-and-flower-burdened Quarter balcony — "I'm not into that exactly, but you just lay back and relax. I guarantee to give you a real serious fuck."

So he did, and she did.

"Really?" I asked. "You're not putting me on?"

"Nuh uh," Josh replied, modestly proud. "It only lasted about a minute. But it was real great, anyway."

"First rate," I murmured. "Absolutely first rate. The fantasy climaxes in sexual...sexual...whatever. Fulfillment. *Ah! m'extase et mon amour!* The narrative arch is now complete. Son, I'm deeply impressed," I told him. To my surprise, he started to cry. Of course, beer has that effect on some people.

"What's the matter now?"

"Getting some ass made me want more," he sobbed. "So after she went to the French Market flea market that morning and brung me back some clothes, I asked her could we do it again."

"And she said — "

"She said she was my friend for life, and she'd never, never forget what I done for her. Also, she don't mind me being kind of small, because big guys hurt and she likes a good tickle. But when it comes to sex, she's got rigid principles: any guys want to do it with her got to give her either money or nice things. And I just don't qualify."

He wiped his eyes with a bar napkin.

"Then, when I got home, Doss was packing. The cops didn't charge him with Van Slaughter because they were glad to see Kong out of circulation. But they warned him that Kong has mean friends and Doss might want to leave town for a short while, like the rest of his life.

"So I lost my roomie, too, and my job's gone, and I can't afford to keep the Squat and I want to move into that great place of Heather's and keep on tickling her, only she won't let me because I ain't got no money to get her nice things."

"What about stealing the pearls?" I asked. Yes, I admit it: by now I was sufficiently potted to be sharing the fantasy.

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"I tried that with Doss last night, just before he left town," he said bitterly. "And I almost got my butt in the slammer. The store's got security cameras and gadgets with little red lights that blink when they see you and a silent alarm went off and cops come running, and I grabbed the pearls and pushed them out through the mail slot only the cops was there so I couldn't get them, and I had to jump through a wall to get away and Doss was supposed to be waiting for me but he drove off when he heard the sirens, and I had to run four miles to home with no clothes on, and the whole thing was like a total fucking mess, and now, Uncle Bert, the cops've got my picture and my fingerprints from the store because I couldn't wear gloves or a mask when I went in through the wall, and when I seen myself on TV tonight I called you up quick 'cause you're the only relative I got ever liked me, and what I want to know is this: can you loan me about four or five thousand dollars to run away and start a new life on?"

Do I blame myself for what followed? Yes. But drunk as I was, how was I to think, how was I to know? Indeed, I believed I was being kind.

"Josh," I said, "the state of my bank account, combined with the ferocity of my wife, won't allow me to loan you a dime. But I'm prepared to make you an offer I've never made to another human being."

He stared at me, blearily — he'd also taken a lot of beer aboard, and into a much smaller body — hardly daring to hope.

"Of late," I confessed, "my imagination has not been as lush, as purpureal, as it once was. Nor do I write as well. My demons don't terrify, my aliens don't alienate, my invented worlds look more and more like Houston on a bad smog day. Do you understand?"

"No."

"What I'm proposing, my boy, is that you continue to devise magnificent fantasies, that I turn them into salable fiction, and that we split the profits. I could guarantee you — oh, say for the first year — "

Josh was staring at me in horror.

"Uncle Bert," he whispered in the most betrayed-sounding voice I ever heard, "*you don't believe me!!*"

"Ah, but I do," I assured him. "I have always believed in the extra-dimensional truth of fiction. You, Joshua, having been in a sense walled out of human life, imagine that you've found a way of passing through the

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barriers that surround you. Is this truth? Yes, a thousand times yes!" I exclaimed, slamming the bar with my fist. "Your imagination's truer than the ordinary — truer than the commonplace — *truer than true!!*"

But Josh continued to stare. His eyes made me uneasy; they were grayish-green, like sick clams, and like clams they gave one a terrible sense of complete discovery: once the shell opened, you saw the whole inside.

"Oh, no," he said, clambering down from the revolving barstool and almost falling in the process. "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. Uncle Bert, this is for real. This is the only real thing ever happened to me. I'ma show you. Watch."

"Josh — " I began. But Josh, lowering his head and extending his arms, charged the painted circus riders on the wall.

"No!" I shouted, and Jimmy yelled something too, I never knew what.

As I watched, Josh plunged — there is no other word — into the wall like a diver into a vertical river.

No quicksand ever swallowed a careless traveler more quickly; no tsunami ever gulped down a seaside resort more completely. A split second, and the circus riders and acrobats were all that remained to be seen, except for a little pile of grungy clothing settling into a heap against the solid wall of the Circus Lounge.

I dismounted from the barstool, staggered, fell, was helped up by Jimmy, and the two of us stood staring down at all that remained of my nephew — a T-shirt labeled CONFEDERATE COTTON COMPANY; a torn pair of jeans; loafers without heels; the dirtiest white socks I ever saw; a thin eelskin wallet; thirty-six cents in change; and a brass key that probably gave entry to the Squat.

"Where the fuck'dee go?" Jimmy demanded, staring wildly here and there.

But I was thinking of the French Quarter twenty-three floors below us, choked with hysterical traffic. I turned away and lurched toward the nearest elevator.

As I fumbled my way into bed later that night, Alice stirred in her sleep and halfway woke.

"You get rid of your idiot nephew?" she asked.

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"Alas, yes."

"Good riddance."

"Don't say that. He's dead."

She woke up entirely. "*Dead*? At his age? Of what?"

"Of lack of imagination. Of rank literalism. Of clinging to mere experience when he might have progressed to the higher truth of fiction. On a less astral plane, he died by falling twenty-three stories, passing completely through an RTA bus — several hysterical riders were telling a cop about it when I arrived on the scene — and plunging God knows how deep into the mucky subsoil beneath Decatur Street.

"He lies there now," I mourned, "embedded deep in the Pleistocene sediments, among the bones of extinct sea-creatures. It's a science-frictional ending."

"A what? Are you drunk?" She sniffed audibly. "You *are* drunk. Go to sleep. We'll sort this out in the morning."

Instead, I got up again.

"Where are you going now?"

"To write a story," I answered.

"At two in the morning? What are you really going to do?"

"Write a story," I answered with dignity, "because at last I have a story to write."

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As many of you know, F&SF *was founded by the same people who published* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *and our pages have always allowed some crossover with the mystery genre. John Morressy takes advantage of our genre-crossing policies in his latest tale of Kedrigern the wizard, whose exploits have graced our pages for more than two decades (said exploits are now being collected in book form, volume one of which is now available under the title of* The Domesticated Wizard*). One question: when a gumshoe wizard walks the mean streets of Gotham or Elfland, or even when he's rattling the door handle of a locked room, what's the proper footwear for the wizard to wear?*

The Game Is a Foot

By John Morressy

THE WIZARD KEDRIGERN would have conceded, reluctantly and grudgingly, that an inn had one advantage over a campsite in the woods: it was more likely to be warm. In a good humor, he might even admit possible superiority in a second area: an inn might conceivably be dry as well. That was as far as he would go in praise of inns. Aside from those two undeniable but unpredictable comforts, he considered a stay at an inn a poor second to a night spent by a brook, with a good fire to keep away the wildlife large and small and a solid protective spell to discourage human intruders.

Home, of course, was his first preference, and he left it with reluctance. Home meant the company of Princess, the efficiency of Spot, and the comfort of his fireside and his books. Inns offered misery at exorbitant prices. Inns were dirty, noisy, crowded, smoky, and smelly. The food was awful, the wine corrosive, the service unspeakable, and the rooms small. The beds were full of lice and the building was full of people, all of whom chattered while awake and snored when asleep. Dogs barked and cats yowled through the night.

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The animals could be silenced and the lice kept at bay by a spell, but coping with the people was difficult without calling attention to oneself, and that was not Kedrigern's way. He had learned long ago that a sensible wizard does not call attention to himself without good cause.

But when the rain is falling and the wind is rising and wolves are howling in the moonless night and a man is far from home and weary in mind and body and low on magical reserves from working a difficult disenchantment, prejudices melt away and reason yields. When he glimpsed the light ahead, and coming closer saw through the shifting curtain of rain the unmistakable outlines of an inn and its stable and outbuildings, Kedrigern felt a warm glow of benevolence toward all inns and innkeepers. Surely this establishment, so fortunately found, would prove to be the One Good Inn, the exception to the unhappy rule. A master chef. A connoisseur's cellar. A punctilious housekeeper. Amiable company. He fervently hoped so.

For a time, it seemed that this might be the case. The place looked uncommonly clean. He obtained a room and a bed all to himself, a rare boon. A fragrant stew was bubbling in the cooking pot, and when he sat down to dine he found the bread almost fresh, and the wine drinkable. Having eaten, he settled himself before the fire for warming and drying. The only other guests were a middle-aged couple and a husky young man with a firm jaw and a stern expression. They were seated on benches, the couple sleeping soundly. Their snoring was all but inaudible.

Kedrigern nodded to the young man, who returned the nod but said nothing. That was fine with Kedrigern. He was not a man given to small talk and idle chat. This inn was turning out to be all he could wish, short of being in his own cottage.

After a time the innkeeper, a slow-moving man named Corgin, drew up a stool and joined them. The company sat for a time in silence, listening to the wind complain around the corners of the inn while the fire crackled and the sleepers snored. Kedrigern felt pleasantly drowsy, and began to nod off. Corgin, his voice lowered out of concern for the sleeping couple, leaned to him and asked, "What brings a scholar out on such a foul night, if I may ask, Master Siger?"

Caught off his guard, Kedrigern gave a start and blinked. He was momentarily puzzled, but quickly recovered his wits. Siger. Scholar. Yes,

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of course, Siger of Trondhjem. He had identified himself as an itinerant scholar. It was an incognito he used often in his travels, one that aroused no unwarranted fear or unhealthy suspicion among those he encountered. "I'm on my way to visit a philosopher. I have some questions about his observations on mutability," he replied.

"Oh. Mutability." Corgin nodded, looking very serious.

"Fascinating subject, mutability."

"Don't know much about it, myself."

"Hardly anyone does."

After a long pause, Corgin asked, "What is mutability, anyway?"

"I'm not quite certain. That's why I'm visiting the philosopher," Kedrigern said.

Corgin pondered that for a time, then gave another slow nod. The young man did not join the conversation, and the sleepers slept on. The dialogue lapsed, as Kedrigern had meant it to. He yawned. After a long silence, the innkeeper said, "We don't get many philosophers passing this way."

"Philosophers aren't much for traveling."

"No." After a longer silence, the innkeeper said, "We get a lot of merchants. Some pilgrims. Last month a courier stayed here. No philosophers, though. Or scholars."

Kedrigern gave a little noncommittal grunt. He could feel his eyes, and his mind, glazing over.

"We have a sheriff here tonight," said the innkeeper, indicating with his thumb the young man.

Kedrigern raised a hand in salute. "I'm Siger of Trondhjem," he said, giving his scholar's pseudonym.

"My name is Rury," said the sheriff. "I enforce the king's justice in this part of the kingdom."

"Are you here in your professional capacity, or are — "

A knock at the door broke in on his inquiry and shattered the peaceful scene in an instant. It was not a casual knock, but an importunate blow that resounded through the house and set pots and dishes to rattling, and it was quickly followed by a dozen more blows of equal force and several indistinct, but angry, shouts. Corgin sprang to his feet and hurried to the door. The sleeping couple started awake with a cry of alarm. Rury's hand

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went to his dagger. Kedrigern, who more out of habit than caution had worked a basic warning spell before entering the inn, was unperturbed. "Nothing to worry about. It's only a traveler," he said.

Rury gave him a quick suspicious glance. "How do you know?"

"A simple exercise in logic. Robbers don't knock, they break in. And any traveler looking for a meal and a bed on a night like this is sure to knock impatiently."

Kedrigern was outwardly nonchalant; inwardly he was furious with himself for his lapse. Once reveal the slightest hint of wizardly power and everyone in the vicinity wants a spell or a charm or a disenchantment, and there goes your peace and quiet.

A cold breeze swept through the room and set the fire to fluttering. The door crashed shut and a loud grating voice bellowed, "Food for me and my men, and your best chamber, and be quick about it, innkeeper! I travel on the king's business. I am Sir Buldram of the Hard Hand, famed throughout the land for my hot temper."

The words had an immediate effect on the hearthside company. Rury muttered under his breath and spat into the flames. The sleepers, now wide awake, exchanged a dark glance; the man bared his teeth and growled indistinct but unmistakably angry words.

Corgin backed into the room, bowing and babbling, "Yes, Sir Buldram. I'll prepare your accommodations. Best chamber in the house. Right over the kitchen. Always fragrant and warm. Sit right down and I'll bring stew for you and your men. An honor and a privilege to serve you, Sir Buldram." He paused to rub the tabletop clean with his apron.

"Bring your best wine, and bring it quickly! And if it is not to my taste, I'll pour a hogshead of it down your throat, do you hear me?" the bellowing voice came again, followed by heavy footsteps and the appearance of a huge figure in red and black who strode to the hearth, turned his back to the fire, folded his brawny arms, and glared upon the other guests.

Sir Buldram loomed a head over Kedrigern and extended a hand's-breadth wider on either side. His scowling face was red, his beard and brows black, his head close-cropped. He looked with contempt from one face to another, then said to the older couple, "It's time for the likes of you to be in your beds. Be off. I require your bench."

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The man rose slowly and helped his wife to her feet. His voice shook as he said, "It's fitting. You took our home and our land. Now you take our bench, too."

"Be careful, grandfather. You speak to a servant of the king," said the knight. He glowered down on the couple for a moment, then smiled — an unexpected and unpleasant spectacle — and said, "I remember you. Yes, I remember you well, old man. Kettry is your name. And your wife is named Hilla. Rebellious types. Refused to pay the king's taxes."

"We had no money," said the woman.

"You had a house, crops, animals, furniture."

"And you took it all," said the man.

"Not half what you owed. But since you seem to have held back enough to squander on an inn, I'll collect the balance when I depart, or take it out of your hides."

Kedrigern had had enough of this. He had entered the inn intending to conserve his magic, but Sir Buldram's manner was so intolerable, his voice so harsh, his very presence so offensive that it could not be ignored. People like Buldram, unless stopped in their tracks, only got worse.

He opted for a simple spell. Before Buldram's men joined the company, he gestured toward the fire and whispered a phrase. The fire flared up and billowed forth a roaring golden tongue. A great cloud of steam arose, and the knight's cloak went up in flames. He gave a cry and began groping at his cloak pin. Kedrigern jumped up, snatched a heavy salver from one of the tables, and began to swat Buldram's back and buttocks vigorously, shouting, "Quick, lend a hand! We must save him!"

Rury and Kettry rushed to beat at the flames with poker and shovel. Hilla doused the knight with ale. After several minutes of frenzied activity and wild shouts, with Buldram howling and cursing and the others crying, "Over here! Get this spot! Harder, it's not out yet!" and beating at the flames with zeal, Buldram finally managed to free himself from his cloak. It fell to the floor, and the firefighters trampled it into a soggy mass while the knight looked on, speechless, rubbing his broad backside. Kedrigern glanced at him, let out a cry of alarm, and flung a mug of ale directly in his face.

"His beard! It's smoking!" he said, taking up another mug. "We must make sure it's out."

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"Enough of your help!" Buldram roared, throwing up his hands. "Buldram of the Hard Hand needs no man's help."

Kedrigern looked at him with an expression of childlike innocence. "We couldn't stand by idle while a servant of the king went up in flames, sir knight."

"It would be disloyal," Rury said, and Kettry and Hilla nodded in agreement.

Two hard-faced men burst into the room, swords drawn. "Is all well, my lord?"

"Idiots! Where were you when your master was on fire?"

"We had to...the horses...the baggage...we were...," the first man started to babble, but Buldram's fist knocked him to the floor. A second blow sent the other one down before he could speak.

"I feel better now," said the knight. "Where is that landlord? I'll teach him to run an inn with a faulty fireplace. I'll give him such a thrashing...." Buldram's speech dissolved into a series of inarticulate growls accompanied by a waving of fists. His dripping face was the color of an eggplant.

"He's preparing food for you. If you thrash him, you won't eat," said Kedrigern.

After another growl and a hateful glare all around, Buldram said, "I'll thrash him tomorrow, just before we leave. What are you all gawking at? I require privacy. I'm on the king's business. Off with you! Go!"

Kedrigern was willing enough to turn in, but he disliked the manner of this dismissal. For the general good, a man like Sir Buldram had to be taken down a few notches. Servant of the king or not, he was an obnoxious lout and a public nuisance. Aside from the enjoyable and entertaining interlude provided by putting out the fire on his cloak, his arrival had spoiled a pleasant evening.

And who was he, anyway? In itself, the title "servant of the king" meant very little. What king did he serve? In this corner of the world, kings were as common as flies in a stable. Anyone who could gather a few score bullies and skullcrackers called himself a king and set about terrorizing and plundering those with a smaller band of brigands or none at all. The political situation was completely out of hand, and people like Buldram were proliferating. Someone had to do something. Buldram could not be permitted to take that elderly couple's last possessions, or pummel the

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innkeeper, or commit any other outrages. He needed a lesson. So did any king who employed such men.

While he pondered a course of action, Kedrigern smothered a great yawn. That decided him. He was too weary to work a properly imaginative spell. A good night's sleep, and he would come up with something suitable for Sir Buldram in the morning, and add a delayed-action spell for him to bring back to his king. That was the way to handle people of that sort. The process would take only a small amount of magic, and it would be magic well spent.

With the question settled for the time being, he turned and started up the narrow stairs behind Rury, with Kettry and Hilla following. He heard Kettry mutter, "Someone ought to cut that devil's throat," and Hilla add, "One of his men will do it, mark my words. Look at the way he treats them."

Rury turned and said, "Let's hear no more of that talk. Buldram's a swine, but he serves the king."

"It's easy for him to say that, but how do we know it's true? He may be a brigand," Kedrigern suggested.

"He serves King Osmall. I've seen him at the court."

"He didn't recognize you. He recognized us, but not you," Kettry said, a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Buldram recognizes only those he considers important and those he can abuse. He's a thoroughgoing blackguard, and I despise him. But I have my responsibilities. If someone kills him, I'll have to see that the murderer is hanged. So let's hear no more talk about it," Rury said.

A wan and harried servant, a pitiful little creature hardly more than a child, was busy preparing the chamber at the end of the hallway for Sir Buldram. When Kedrigern addressed her, she cringed as if from a blow.

"It's all right, child. We only want to know where our rooms are," he said.

With a sad smile, she conducted them to their rooms. This done, she scurried back to her labors.

Corgin's inn was unusual in that it provided each visitor or couple with an individual chamber. This was an unheard-of luxury. The usual practice among innkeepers was to cram as many guests as possible into a common bed, or accommodate them closely packed on straw pallets on

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the floor. True, Corgin's rooms were tiny, the walls were thin, the linen was dubious, and the vermin were numerous and hungry, but that was only to be expected. Kedrigern was satisfied. He had dined well and now enjoyed privacy and a measure of quiet. And the roof leaked scarcely at all.

A small spell secured him against drips and intruders, and another directed the vermin to Sir Buldram's chamber. He considered a silencing spell to keep out the sound of snoring, but decided to conserve his magic. It was unlikely that anyone would snore loudly enough to be heard over the howling of the wind and beating of the rain.

Kedrigern's chamber was directly over the main room of the inn. He reconsidered the wisdom of a silencing spell when Buldram's roar ascended from below, followed by the noisy chomping and clatter of his dining and his loud swearing at his men, the servant girl, and the innkeeper. He settled for a very small spell to block sound from below.

He had just drifted off to sleep when a loud angry voice and a door slamming down the hall awoke him. Sir Buldram had retired. Just as he was going off once again he heard a cry of rage and a stream of curses. Silence then returned.

He awoke once more during the night. The wind had died. Someone was snoring with a sound like the uprooting of forest giants or the pouring of buckets of gravel down an iron chute at brief intervals. The noise came from the direction of Sir Buldram's chamber.

Kedrigern was hesitant to resort to a stronger silencing spell; in dribs and drabs, this stay was costing him more magic than he wanted to expend. He lay awake for a time. He tried sleeping with his fingers in his ears, which proved impossible. He considered alternative courses of action, some of them drastic. In the midst of his deliberation, the snoring suddenly stopped. He waited for it to resume at greater volume. It did not. With a sigh of relief, he pulled the covers close around him and went back to sleep.

Next morning Kedrigern was awakened rudely by shouts, running footsteps, and pounding at his door. Someone was hammering on every door, and amid the general hullabaloo, he could distinguish the words, "Sir Buldram...can't be awakened...foul play!"

He splashed cold water on his face, dressed quickly, and lifted the spell on his door. People were milling about the hallway in various states

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of agitation. Buldram's two men-at-arms were standing in front of the knight's door, both talking at the same time. Corgin was pulling at his hair and wailing, "Something terrible has happened, I know it, I know it! I'm ruined! Ruined!" The little servant girl was weeping piteously. Only Rury remained calm, and when Kedrigern joined the group the sheriff took complete charge.

"Everyone is here now. We can begin," he said.

"Kettry and Hilla are missing," Kedrigern pointed out.

"They fled in the night. If a foul deed has been done, they're obviously the guilty ones. We'll run them down, never fear."

"Corgin's wife isn't here, either."

"She's in the kitchen. I've already questioned her. Corgin, give me the key to the room," he said.

Cringing and ducking, Corgin said, "I don't have it, your honor. Buldram took it so he could lock the room from inside. He said he trusted no one."

"That's right, sheriff. Even in his own castle, he locks himself in at night and bars the door," said one of the men-at-arms. The other added, "We heard him turn the key, and we heard the bar fall in place. We spent the night on our pallets outside the door."

"Sound asleep, I suppose," Rury said.

They shook their heads in vigorous denial. "One of us was always awake," said the first.

"We had to be alert. Buldrum used to check, and if we were both asleep, he'd thrash us bloody," said the second.

"Was he carrying much gold?"

"Hardly a bit. He hadn't started collecting. This was his first stop."

The second man said, "He wasn't protecting gold, he was protecting his life. There's many have sworn to put a knife in Buldram of the Hard Hand."

Rury looked at the man's bruised cheek and then at his companion's black eye. He said nothing.

Corgin pushed himself forward and said, "Oh, sir, he may only be sleeping soundly. He had a good bit of wine last evening."

The men-at-arms supported his words. "He's a terrible one for the wine. Two full pitchers he drank, sheriff," they said.

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"If you think he's lying in there drunk, why did you raise the alarm?"

"He told us he wanted to get an early start this morning. We were ready at first light, and when he didn't come out, we knocked on the door and he didn't answer. So we knocked again, and a third time. He didn't make a sound."

"Let's waste no more time," Rury said. "Break the door down."

"That's good solid oak. It would take six men with a battering ram to bring it down," Corgin said.

"Is there a window?"

"Yes, sir. But it's very small and it doesn't open. Nailed tight shut, it is. We keep our guests safe from robbers and thieves."

"What if you had a fire?"

Corgin was silent for a long time, as if a fire at his inn were something beyond his imagination. "Oh, a fire is a terrible thing, sir. We wouldn't want that."

Rury seemed uncertain what to do next. The others were all looking at one another with a variety of suspicious expressions. Kedrigern grew impatient. He did not wish to be delayed in getting home because Buldram was snoring away in a drunken stupor. He did not care a fig for Buldram's rest, or his health, or his problems, whatever they might be. "The servant is a very small girl," he said. "Pry open the window and let her go in and open the door."

Over Corgin's wails about the reputation of his inn, the suggestion was followed. The rain had stopped, and the ground at the rear of the inn was nearly dry. In a very short time a ladder had been set in place and the window had been wrenched open. The servant was thrust through, protesting shrilly all the while. No sooner was she in the room than she let out a wild cry of horror and rushed back to the window, scrambling frantically over Rury and the men-at-arms, who did their unavailing best to thrust her back up the ladder.

Corgin took a substantial stick from the woodpile. "I'll give her a good beating. She'll do as she's told when I'm done."

Kedrigern stayed him. "Let me talk to her."

He took the girl aside and sat her down. She was trembling, weeping and babbling incoherently. Her terror was plain to see. He spoke to her

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gently, his voice low and unhurried, and she grew calm. No magic was required, merely patience.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Gup, sir."

"Charming name. Now listen, Gup. You must go back into the room. It's very important."

Her head lowered, she muttered, "I can't, sir. The big loud man is dead, sir, and it's my fault. I killed him."

Kedrigern's astonishment at once gave way to a surge of pity. Gup was a woeful sight, pale and pinched, with dark circles under her eyes, underfed and overworked. She looked like a bundle of sticks wrapped in a rag. It was plain to see that her young life had been miserable, and now it might end on the gallows. "How did you manage to kill such a big man, Gup? He was locked in the room, wasn't he?"

"I wished him dead, sir. I was working as fast as I could, sir, truly I was, but he kicked me and hit me and cursed me and I wished him dead. I didn't really mean for him to die, but he hurt me so much I couldn't help the wish."

Kedrigern gave a deep sigh of relief. "And is that how you killed him?"

"Yes, sir. I'm terrible sorry, sir. It was wicked of me."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He's lying there purple as a plum with his eyes wide open and an awful look on his face, and he's not moving. And it's all my fault. I have to hang now, don't I?"

"I don't think so, Gup. But you must go back in the room and open the door for the sheriff."

She paled and looked up at him in terror. "Oh, sir, I can't do that! I can't go back in that room with him! Don't make me, please!"

"You're the only one who can, Gup. We need your help, and you must be brave. And I promise you this: if you do as I ask, you won't have to tell anyone about your wish, and I won't tell, either. No one will ever know."

"And they won't hang me?"

Kedrigern shook his head. "Nobody's going to hang you, Gup."

She sniffled and wiped her nose with a skinny dirty forearm. "Thank you, sir."

Without another word, she rose and went to the ladder. Minutes later,

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the door of Sir Buldram's chamber was wide open and Rury was alone inside, standing over the knight's body.

While everyone's attention was on the sheriff, Kedrigern slid his hand inside his shirt and drew out the medallion of his guild. He quickly scanned the room through the Aperture of True Vision, then returned the medallion to concealment. The room bore no trace of magic, past or present.

That was a relief. If there had been wrongdoing, it was of human agency, strictly a problem for the sheriff, and there was no need for a wizard to get mixed up in it. Or so he thought.

"Siger, you're a scholar. What do you make of this?" Rury called out to him.

Kedrigern entered, and at Rury's order, closed the door behind him, excluding the others. He studied the rigid figure on the bed and said, "Looks dead to me."

"Dead as the bedpost," Rury said, shaking his head slowly. "It's a shame, a terrible shame."

Kedrigern looked up, surprised. "I thought you despised him."

"Oh, I did. I was hoping to hang him. He was stealing from the king, I'm positive of it, but I can't accuse a man of his rank without irrefutable proof. And now he's been murdered. This is a terrible disappointment for me, Siger."

"Are you sure he was murdered?"

"No doubt about it," Rury said, pointing to the dagger in Buldram's hand.

Kedrigern, in riposte, pointed to the garments neatly hung on pegs and the boots standing by the bedside. "There's no sign of a struggle."

"He was taken by surprise. The dagger was a vain attempt to defend himself against the attacker."

"What attacker? Nobody could get into the room."

"Someone did. How else could they kill him?"

"Poison," Kedrigern suggested.

"He wasn't poisoned. His men ate food from the same pot and drank wine from the same pitcher. He made the innkeeper taste everything before serving it."

"Very well, he wasn't poisoned. He wasn't strangled, either."

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"Yes, we can rule out strangling," Rury said.

"No one bashed in his skull."

"And he wasn't stabbed. There's no blood anywhere," Rury said. He sounded disappointed.

Kedrigern said, "He must have died of natural causes. Many people do, you know."

"A man with as many enemies as Buldram doesn't die a natural death. Someone killed him."

Rury's logic was not persuasive, but Kedrigern saw no point in arguing. "If he was killed, there has to be a wound," he said. "Let's look for it."

They stripped off Buldram's nightshirt and examined him from head to foot. The body was heavily embroidered with scars, but they found no wound. Kedrigern called Rury's attention to a tiny puncture on the sole of Buldram's foot.

"Doesn't mean a thing. Couldn't be a snakebite. There'd be two punctures," said the sheriff.

Kedrigern wanted to be helpful. "Maybe it was a snake with one fang."

Rury gave him a dubious look. "Never heard of such a thing. More likely it's a splinter. These floors must be bristling with them."

"They seem smooth to me," Kedrigern said.

Rury thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Splinters don't kill people, people kill people. We're looking for a murderer. And maybe — " At a sudden thought, he reached under Buldram's pillow and groped around. He withdrew a small purse and held it up with a crestfallen look.

"At least we don't have to look for a thief," Kedrigern said.

"This tells us one thing: the murderer sought revenge, not gold."

"What murderer? No one could have gotten in," Kedrigern said. He was losing patience rapidly.

Rury scratched his head in silence and then said, "Buldrum was elf-shot. I should have recognized the signs."

"But there are no signs."

"Elf-shots leave no sign. That's how you recognize them."

"But elf-shots only affect cattle. And they don't kill, they only lame. It won't do, Rury."

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The sheriff thought some more. At last he said with an air of great confidence, "Then he was murdered by an assassin."

"A pretty clever assassin, to get in and out of a sealed room and kill someone without leaving a wound."

"It was a ghost assassin."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"You scholars don't know everything, Siger. Look at the facts: Buldram wasn't stabbed or poisoned or strangled; there are no wounds on his body; no one could have gotten into the room. Yet he had his dagger drawn to fight off an assassin. Therefore he was assassinated. And it could only have been a ghost assassin." Rury folded his arms and looked smug.

"Why did he draw his dagger? He couldn't have seen a ghost assassin."

With a triumphant gesture, Rury said, "Ah, but he sensed it. A man knows when there's a ghost about."

Kedrigern threw up his hands. Reasoning with Rury was a hopeless undertaking. The smell of fresh-baked bread was rising from the kitchen just below, and he was hungry. Buldram might have had a thousand enemies, but none of them could have had a hand in this. Obviously, the man had had a fit of some kind during the night. If Rury was too dense to grasp that, there was little to be done with him. In any event, obvious facts seemed to matter little to the sheriff. "Have it your way. It was a ghost assassin," Kedrigern said.

"That's the only logical solution. And it presents a problem."

"What problem? You've solved the mystery."

"But I can't hang a ghost."

"No, I suppose you can't. Is that a problem?"

"Don't be thick, man! If a servant of the king is murdered, someone has to be hung. Justice demands it. So I'll have to find someone to hang."

"Oh, really now, Rury — "

The sheriff broke in, "You have nothing to worry about. You've assisted my investigation. I'll hang Kettry. May as well hang Hilla, too."

Kedrigern frowned. He had long been troubled by the casual attitude toward life — the life of others — shown by people who could look forward, at best, to a mere fifty- or sixty-year lifespan. From the standpoint of a wizard with a reasonable life expectancy upwards of five hundred years, it seemed an absurdly improvident attitude. "You'll have to find

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them first. I'm sure they're far from here by now," he said. "And if they left during the rain, they won't be easy to track."

Rury gave a little grunt of annoyance. "Hadn't thought of that. One of the men-at-arms will have to do."

"But they couldn't have done it."

"All right, then. I'll hang the servant."

"The servant?!" Kedrigern cried. "She's only a child."

Rury considered that for a moment. "Yes, I suppose she's a bad choice. Doesn't weigh any more than a cat. It's difficult hanging the small ones. Something always seems to go wrong."

Kedrigern's annoyance was yielding to growing anger. He had a simple straightforward view of justice: the guilty should be punished, and the innocent should not. "Rury, you can't send someone to the gallows who didn't commit the crime," he said.

"I have to hang someone. It's my job. Any number of people would have done Buldram in if they had the chance, wouldn't they? They would have been glad to be rid of him. He was the king's most effective tax collector."

"But you can't hang an innocent person. That's not justice."

With a smile and an easy confident gesture, Rury said, "No problem there. I put them on the rack, and they confess their guilt. They always do. I haven't hung an innocent person yet."

A corollary of Kedrigern's view of justice was that those condemned as guilty should indeed be guilty, and not unfortunate victims of circumstance, mischance, or the exigencies of those charged with executing the law. Rury might be an upright man by the local standards, but Kedrigern considered those standards to be deplorably low.

The situation was getting completely out of hand. Buldram was causing more trouble dead than he did when alive. Something had to be done. From the look of things, only magic would serve.

Kedrigern reached inside his shirt and laid his fingers on his medallion. It bore two notches, the Cleft of Clemency and the slightly smaller Kerf of Judgment. Each of them had considerable power, and he employed them rarely. This was clearly a proper occasion. He placed a fingertip in each notch, turned aside to speak a few words very softly, and then reached out and laid his hand on Rury's shoulder.

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"There's no reason to hang anyone. You know that, don't you, Rury?" he said.

The sheriff looked at him and blinked. He seemed confused. He hesitated for a moment, then said in a monotone, as if reciting an old formula, "A murderer must hang. That's the law."

"That's right, Rury. But there's been no murder here. Isn't it obvious that Buldram died of a sudden fever? He shows all the signs. His face was distorted, and he was in an agitated state. I'm sure all the wine he drank and the excitement over his burning cloak hastened his end. He died of a brain fever."

In the same dreamy voice, Rury said, "A brain fever. Yes, it must have been a brain fever. It's obvious. No wounds. Face distorted. Wine...cloak.... No murder at all. A brain fever."

Kedrigern removed his hand from Rury's shoulder and said, "A brilliant deduction. You've convinced me, Rury. Let's tell the others."

It was astonishing how quickly memories flooded back into everyone's mind when Rury announced his conclusions. The men-at-arms recalled Buldram's mention of feeling out of sorts earlier in the day. Corgin spoke of his alarm at the knight's flushed face and excited manner — sure signs of the onset of brain fever — and described how Buldram had eaten only three small helpings of the excellent stew and drunk eight goblets of wine in quick succession, as if consumed with thirst. Even Gup observed that when the poor loud man had kicked her, it seemed to cost him a great deal of effort. Only Corgin's wife was unavailable for comment, having spent the entire evening in the kitchen. Clearly the consensus supported Rury. Everyone was lavish in praise of his speed and ingenuity in solving what had appeared to be a baffling mystery.

The rains of the previous night, though fierce, had ended before dawn. Now the clouds had passed, the sun was shining, and the roads were passable. No one seemed inclined to tarry at the inn.

Buldram's men wrapped his body in the sheet on which it lay and piled it in the baggage wagon. Rury proposed to leave with them for King Osmall's court to announce the death of the royal tax collector and deliver his report on the case. Kedrigern found him in the fatal chamber, making a final examination of Buldram's belongings.

"I had hoped to find an account book," Rury said in greeting.

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"Buldram has collected a great deal of money for the king over the years."

"Buldram didn't strike me as the sort of man who reads and writes. He may have kept everything in his head."

"More likely he simply chose not to keep records. Too bad." Lowering his voice, Rury said, "From the gossip I've heard around the court, he helped himself to a good portion of what he collected. His victims would say nothing; they were all terrified. It was my hope that I'd find proof among his belongings. It looks as though the proof doesn't exist."

Ordinarily, Kedrigern admired anyone who was conscientious about his work, but Rury's eagerness to hang people seemed almost obsessive. A reminder seemed in order. "Buldram was fortunate to have died peacefully in bed," he observed, adding, "of natural causes."

"Not so peacefully. You're forgetting the dagger in his hand. There's no way to explain that," Rury said.

Kedrigern dismissed that detail with a slighting gesture. "It was right in character. Buldram was a knight. A man like that would react to any provocation — even an ache or pain — by drawing a weapon."

"Perhaps you're right. Unfortunately for him, he couldn't frighten off brain fever," said Rury with obvious relish.

"Not so unfortunate. It beats hanging."

Rury's satisfaction became less pronounced. He held out his hand. "Thank you for your assistance, Siger. I won't forget how helpful you were."

You'll never know how helpful I was, Kedrigern thought as he bid a cheerful farewell to the sheriff.

Left alone in the chamber, the impress of Buldram's body still visible in the bed, he reflected on the morning's events. The incident was closed, but nothing at all had been solved. The true cause of Buldram's death was a mystery, and likely to remain one.

The only indisputable fact about the whole affair was that the man was dead; Kedrigern had not the vaguest notion of what really had done him in, though he was certain what had not. Not brain fever, or the hand of Hilla or Kettry or one of his own men-at-arms, or the wish of a servant girl. Corgin and his wife had not even been mentioned as possible culprits. Magic in any form could definitely be ruled out. As for elvish arrows or a ghost assassin, the less said the better. There was not a mark on the man

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except for that pinprick on the sole of his foot. Rury had attributed that to a splinter, and for once he was probably right.

But there had been no splinter in Buldram's foot. And there was that dagger in his hand.... Why? Kedrigern shook his head, still puzzled. These were small points, probably insignificant, but they bothered him. He turned the question over in his mind. It was possible...no, surely not...unless...perhaps....

And then it came clear. He laughed aloud as the obvious answer burst upon him: Buldram had been digging out the splinter when he died.

Kedrigern marveled at the simplicity of the explanation. It was self-evident, and it clarified everything — except the exact cause of death, and that was best left to the doctors of physic. But it was reasonable to assume that Buldram had suffered an apoplexy while raging about the splinter. Perhaps he had actually had an attack of brain fever, as well.

He turned to leave the chamber, and then it occurred to him that one more thing remained unexplained. Corgin maintained his inn with great care. The floors were clean and smooth. They were not, as Rury had suggested, bristling with splinters, as was usually the case in such establishments. So where had that splinter come from?

It was an inconsequential detail, but Kedrigern was curious. Better to settle this matter once and for all and go his way with his mind clear of unanswered questions. He had an orderly mind, and wanted closure. He drew out his medallion and surveyed the floor through the Aperture of True Vision to see if he could spot the rough patch where Buldram had picked up the splinter.

The floors of the room were as smooth as the palm of his hand. He found no trace of a splinter, but his eye was caught by the glint of metal. He knelt, and as he bent to examine it more closely, the pleasant aroma of fresh-baked bread wafted up between the cracks in the floor. Clean and smooth the floorboards might be, but they were not tightly fitted, he thought, recalling Buldram's uproar so clearly audible on the previous night.

The object he had seen appeared to be the tip of a long, thick needle. It barely protruded above floor level. Kedrigern reached down to try to tug it free, but a sudden suspicion made him withdraw his hand. This was an unusual needle. How, he wondered, did a needle, any needle, come to be in such a position? How did it come to be in this chamber at all? A needle

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was completely out of place here. Buldram was definitely not the sort of man to mend his own garments, or relax with a bit of fancy embroidery. Something was amiss.

He thought about his discovery for a time. Then, gathering his pack and blanket, he went below and entered the kitchen, where Corgin and his wife were laboring. He brushed past them, his eyes scanning the low ceiling. With a bright, "Ah, there you are," he reached up and tugged something free. Corgin and his wife exchanged a frightened glance. Kedrigern held out his hand to display the long kitchen skewer that had been lodged, point upward, between the boards.

He turned to the innkeeper and his wife, who were now clinging to one another, gaping at him in unconcealed panic. "You forgot to remove one of the skewers. Tell me, Corgin, what poison did you use? It must have been very powerful to kill a man Buldram's size," he said.

The innkeeper paled. He broke from his wife and staggered back. His wife gave a despairing cry of, "He knows! He knows everything! He must be a wizard!" and buried her face in her hands.

Kedrigern folded his arms and looked on them with a firm no-nonsense gaze. "Perhaps I am, Goodwife Corgin. And perhaps I'm simply a man who notices things that others don't. But I want an answer."

"He would have taken everything, like he did to Kettry and Hilla and the rest. He's robbed everyone in the valley, and for leagues around," Corgin said, his voice quaking.

"He squeezed us dry. He robbed the people and he robbed the king, and nobody could stop him," his wife blurted.

"He bragged about it last night, when he told me he was going to assess us six crowns in tax. 'Three for the king and three for his loyal tax collector,' he said. He knew we couldn't pay. Six crowns is more than we make in two years. He would have seized our inn, the way he's seized land and farms and cattle these last seven years."

"We've worked so hard. We keep our inn spotless and serve good food, and we don't cheat travelers...it wasn't fair, your honor!" said Corgin's wife amid copious tears.

"Did Buldram actually admit that he stole from the king?"

"He boasted about it! He knows nobody among us would dare to denounce him," she said.

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"Who'd listen to us?" Corgin said. "So we did him in."

At Kedrigern's urging, he described the method. He and his wife had been in the kitchen, lamenting their imminent ruin, listening to Buldram's heavy tread overhead, when the idea had come to them. They had heard the knight's boots hit the floor when he drew them off, and knew that he was walking about the room barefoot. Taking a dozen sharp skewers, they coated the tips with a poison they had obtained from a mountebank in lieu of payment, and forced them up through cracks in the ceiling near the site of the bed. Then they waited. When they heard Buldram's cry, followed by a stream of vivid imprecations, they knew their plan had succeeded. They acted quickly to remove the skewers. In their joy and relief they overlooked one, and that was their undoing.

"But we wouldn't have let that sheriff hang nobody, I swear," said the innkeeper's wife. "Not even Gup."

"How decent of you," said Kedrigern.

"There's no need to summon the sheriff back," Corgin said with a deep sigh. "We'll go out and hang ourselves in the barn."

"Can't we have lunch first? No sense in wasting this good soup," his wife said, looking dolefully at the bubbling stockpot.

They turned to Kedrigern in appeal. He thought for a very brief time and then said, "Why don't you two just have lunch and forget the hanging? There's no need for anyone to hang."

Corgin sighed again. "How much do you want? We're not wealthy, but we'll give you — "

Kedrigern held up a hand to silence him. "You misunderstand me. You said that Buldram confessed to stealing from the king."

"He didn't confess it, he boasted of it!"

"And what is the penalty for stealing from the king?"

"Death," they said with one voice.

"It would appear to me that justice has been served far more effectively than Rury would have served it," said Kedrigern with a resigned shrug. "Let's say no more on the subject. But don't make a habit of treating your guests this way."

"We've never done such a thing before. Never even thought of it!" cried Goodwife Corgin.

"And we'll never do it again, your honor, never, I swear! Oh, thank

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you, thank you!" Corgin blurted, falling to his knees. "How can we repay you?"

"Anything you want, your excellency!" his wife cried, dropping heavily to her knees at his side.

"Oh, get up," Kedrigern said. He had been well paid for his work on this trip, and had no wish to take a few coins from hard-working people. When Corgin and his wife had climbed, groaning, to their feet, he said, "Here's what I want: you must treat Gup well from now on. Feed her decently and stop thrashing her. She has a good heart."

The innkeeper and his wife exchanged a puzzled glance. Corgin laughed — a tentative laugh, as if at a joke he did not understand — and said, "She's only a foundling brat, your honor."

"No need to concern yourself with the likes of Gup," said his wife. "She doesn't even — "

Their words transformed Kedrigern. The look that he turned on them made the innkeeper recoil as if from a blow and his wife emit a shriek of terror. The wizard seemed to grow; he extended his hand and held them with his blazing eyes for a terrifying instant; but before he could blast them to dust, he dropped his hand. He covered his eyes and stepped back. He stood for a moment breathing slowly and deeply to compose himself. When he spoke, his voice was calm but icy.

"Treat foundlings well, Corgin. You never know who they may turn out to be," he said without looking at them.

Corgin's voice cracked when he tried to reply. He finally managed to squeak out, "We will, we will, your honor, sir. We'll treat her like our own daughter."

"Do better than that. She deserves good food and warm clothing. Fair wages. And no more beatings."

"No, your honor. Never again. Not even a harsh word."

"Start by giving her a good meal. Right now. She's earned it many times over."

"Yes, your honor. A grand big bowl of soup, your honor. And plenty of bread."

"Even a bit of meat," his wife added. "And an apple."

"And your honor...the skewer?" Corgin said, reaching out a hopeful hand.

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"I'll keep that for a time," Kedrigern said.

When he saw Gup seated before a huge bowl of soup, with a slice of buttered bread in one hand and a spoon in the other and an expression on her face of astonished bliss, he took up his belongings and left the inn. The morning mist had dissipated, and now the sky was bright and the air was cool and bracing. It was a good morning to be on the road.

All things considered, he was satisfied with the night's work. He was not absolutely certain how a king's magistrate would look upon his decision, but in his own mind it seemed a judgment worthy of Solomon. A confessed thief had paid the lawful penalty of his crimes, and no innocent person was in danger of hanging. That was about as close to justice as one could expect in Osmall's kingdom. Hilla and Kettry were safely away. Poor little Gup was enjoying a respite from her customary mistreatment, and the improvement in her condition was likely to last. The skewer, safe in Kedrigern's possession, was surety for that.

As for himself, Kedrigern had learned a valuable lesson: when traveling, always carry a pair of bedroom slippers. With thick soles. ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE'LL CELEBRATE our 53rd anniversary in the usual style—with a double issue packed with great stories. We don't yet have the final lineup for the issue, but here are some of the goodies we have in store for you:

- "Watching Matthew," a poignant tale from Damon Knight
- "Social Dreaming of the Frin," a short, thoughtful piece by Ursula Le Guin
- "The Drive-In Puerto Rico," Lucius Shepard's latest Latin American adventure

Other likely suspects include Tanith Lee, Ron Goulart, Jeffrey Ford, and Terry Bisson, plus columns by Charles de Lint, Gregory Benford, Paul Di Filippo, and more. And looking ahead, we've got new stories in the works by Ray Aldridge, Jerry Oltion, Kit Reed, and Jack O'Connell, among many others. Subscribe now and guarantee yourself another year's worth of great reading.

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CURIOSITIES

THE BRIGHT MESSENGER, BY ALGERNON BLACKWOOD (1921)

IN 1911, inspired after a visit to the Caucasus, Blackwood was able to finish *Julius LeVallon* (see *F&SF* May 2000), the book that described how an elemental spirit became trapped in the body of a human child. That was a precursor to the book Blackwood really wanted to write.

Blackwood was fascinated by the concept of the Diva. He believed there was a separate evolution of spiritual beings that had developed alongside human evolution. These Nature spirits have the general name of Diva and within them are a range of beings, which include the sprites and fairies at one end through to planetary entities at the other. These beings control the Laws of Nature. They are, in effect, Nature's policemen. Blackwood wanted to portray the kind of being who was half-human, half-elemental. Unfortunately the First World War intervened and he did not complete that sequel, *The Bright Messenger*, until 1921.

In *The Bright Messenger* we discover the child of Julius LeVallon, Julian, now a young man. Trapped within him is this elemental spirit which Blackwood calls N.H. (for Non-Human). Through psychologist Edward Fillery, who looks after him, we study LeVallon and try and get a glimpse of N.H. It is Fillery's hope that he can release N.H. so that the elemental and human spirits merge creating a new Nature Child, capable of healing the Earth after the War. N.H., though, has other views. It observes mankind, though we learn very little about N.H. Only at the end does it reveal to Fillery its belief that mankind is not yet ready for this next stage in spiritual evolution. That was eighty years ago. Are we any more ready now?

—Mike Ashley

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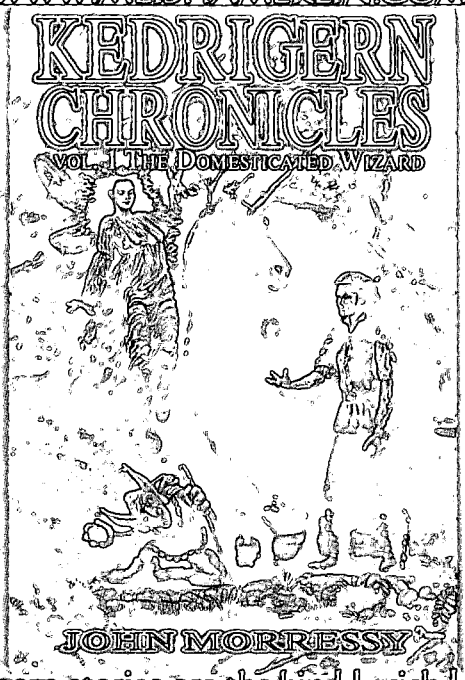
KEDRIGERN CHRONICLES

VOL. 1 THE DOMESTICATED WIZARD



JOHN MORRESSY

"Your Kedrigern stories are the kind I wish I had written"
L. Sprague de Camp

A WIZARD'S LIFE IS NOT AN EASY LIFE. ONE NEVER KNOWS WHO, OR WHAT, ONE'S NEXT CLIENT WILL BE, OR WHAT KIND OF UNPLEASANTNESS HE, OR SHE, OR IT, IS BRINGING. IT'S NO WONDER WIZARDS PREFER TO LIVE SOLITARY LIVES IN ISOLATED TOWERS OR RUINS OR CAVES. THEY'RE LOOKING FOR SOME PEACE AND QUIET.

SO WHEN A YOUNG MAN OF 160 OR SO—NO AGE AT ALL FOR A WIZARD—MEETS A BEAUTIFUL ENCHANTED PRINCESS AND RELEASES HER FROM A CRUEL SPELL, IT SEEMS THE PERFECT CHANCE TO SETTLE DOWN TO A LIFE OF COZY DOMESTICITY. WITH A BIT OF MAGIC HERE AND THERE TO TAKE CARE OF THE HOUSEWORK AND A LOYAL HOUSE-TROLL TO DO THE HEAVY LIFTING, THINGS OUGHT TO BE IDYLLIC.

AND THEY WOULD BE, IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE UNREASONABLE CLIENTS, THE BARBARIAN SWORDSMEN, THE HOME FURNISHINGS WITH MINDS OF THEIR OWN, THE OTHERWORLDLY INTRUDERS, AND THE REST OF THOSE ANNOYING DAY-TO-DAY PROBLEMS OF THE PROFESSION.

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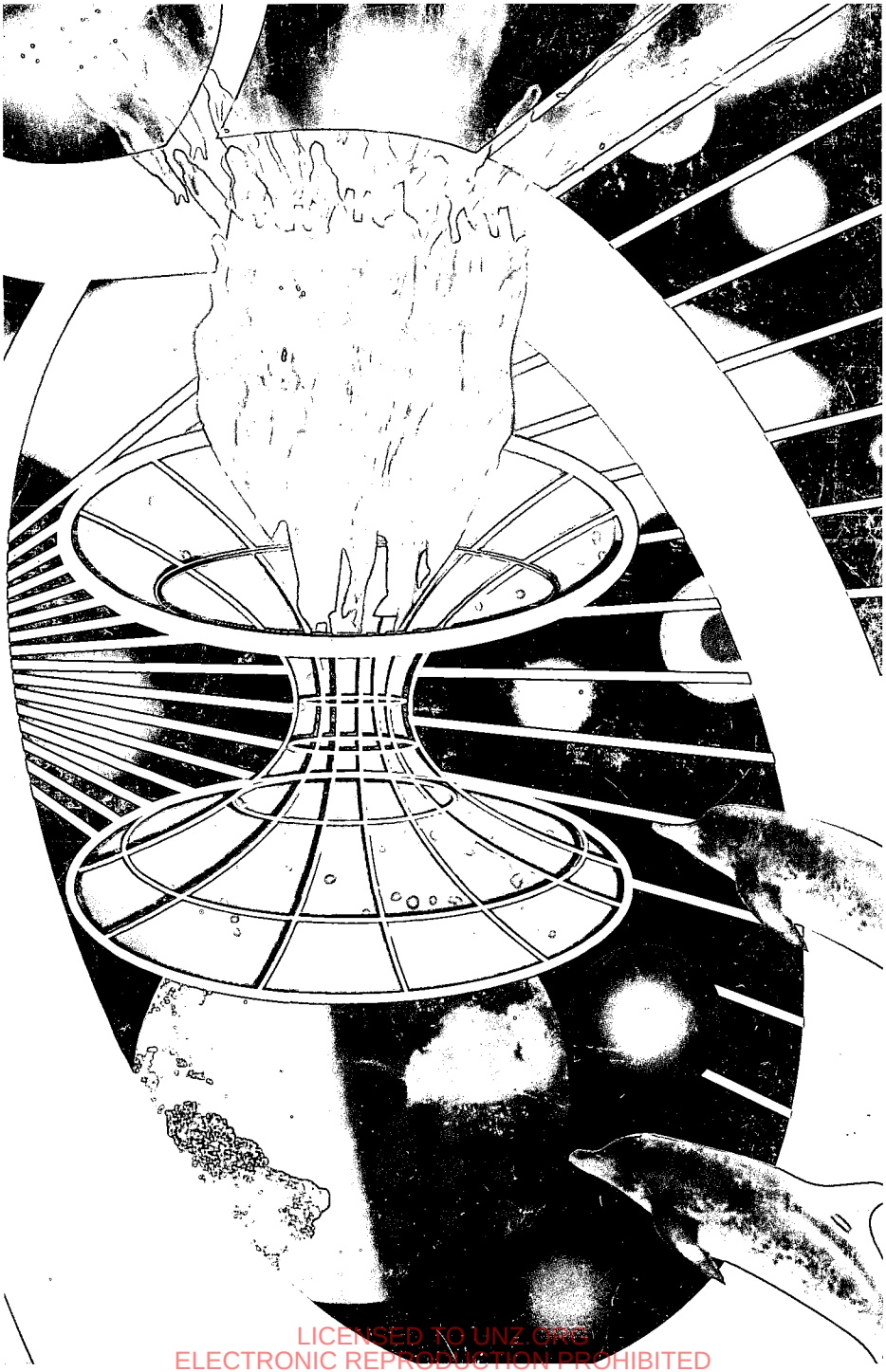

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